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**REVISITING JAMES COWAN:
A REASSESSMENT OF
THE NEW ZEALAND WARS (1922-23)**

*A thesis presented in fulfilment of
the requirement for the degree of
Master of Philosophy in English
at Massey University, Albany,
Auckland, New Zealand.*

GREGORY WOOD

2010

Abstract

Widely differing perceptions of the early twentieth century New Zealand writer James Cowan have led to confusion over how he should be best remembered – as a journalist, an historian, or a combination of both. Most of the previous scholarly assessments of Cowan have focused on his greatest achievement, *The New Zealand Wars* (1922-23), and not sought further connections with his other works to reveal the existence of a coherent historiography. This thesis fleshes out Cowan's historiography by including and reviewing three other books in his oeuvre, two written immediately before the release of *The New Zealand Wars* (*The Maoris of New Zealand* and *The Adventures of Kimble Bent*), and one shortly afterwards (*The Maoris in the Great War*). All four books contributed in their own unique way to an early goal of Cowan's to write a history of Maori-Pakeha interaction and reconciliation following the turmoil of the New Zealand Wars of the nineteenth century. They also reveal a progressive attempt by Cowan to write history of a suitable standard to ultimately earn him the dual status of firstly, 'oral historian' and secondly, 'public historian', that is, 'an historian writing outside academia'. The terms did not exist in Cowan's era, so his research methods must be considered advanced for the time. My subsequent review of Cowan's major work *The New Zealand Wars* shows that his writing transcended journalism in its creation, and has led to this reassessment of Cowan as a much more significant writer for his era than has been accorded to him so far.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisors for their exemplary input, Dr Jack Ross from the English section of the School of Cultural Studies at Massey University's Albany Campus, and Professor Michael Belgrave from the History section at Albany.

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Introduction

I. Literature Survey

This thesis looks at the early twentieth century writer James Cowan (1870-1943), who is remembered today mostly for his two-volume history *The New Zealand Wars* (1922-23). At the age of seventeen, Cowan began a lifelong career as a journalist and writer of books in a number of genres, including folklore and travel writing. But his historical works based around the ‘New Zealand Wars’ (a term he created) of the mid-to-late nineteenth century became the major focus of his writing, along with New Zealand maritime history.

However, changing perceptions over time of what constitutes ‘an historian’ have led to confusing assessments of how Cowan should be placed within New Zealand literary history.¹ Should he be remembered as a journalist, or historian, or some kind of combination of both?

The first step in understanding Cowan is to look at how he has been perceived in the past. This must precede any meaningful questions around the best approach to study him. Accordingly, what follows are some key assessments of Cowan’s work by Peter Fraser, Alan Mulgan, David Simmons, Michael King, James Belich, Peter Gibbons and Chris Hilliard. In fairness to some of these commentators, I have been selective with their comments, preferring to look for unique angles in their viewpoints rather than consensus in order to seek different ways of *seeing* Cowan. Once we can have a better idea of current perceptions of Cowan by those who sought to understand him, we can undertake the next step of providing a methodology on how best to study his work on the New Zealand Wars.

¹ This thesis uses the term ‘*an* historian’ as opposed to ‘*a* historian’, but the choice remains open, according to *The New Fowlers Modern English Usage* (Burchfield 1998: 2).

Peter Fraser, 1944

Cowan as a visionary

Peter Fraser (1884-1950) was the New Zealand Labour Prime Minister from 1940-49. At one time he had been a journalist, writing and editing the Labour Party organs the *Maoriland Worker* and the *New Zealand Worker* during the 1920s. As Prime Minister he had a long-standing sympathy with Maori and on his initiative the Department of Native Affairs was renamed Maori Affairs in 1947. He was also a voracious reader, and spearheaded government initiatives supporting the arts (Beaglehole 1-7).

Fraser was a long-time admirer of Cowan, and in 1935 arranged for him to receive one of the first pensions given out to distinguished but impoverished New Zealand authors (Colquhoun 3). In 1942 Cowan was languishing in a public ward in Wellington Hospital recovering from a stroke. As soon as Fraser was alerted to Cowan's plight he arranged for him to be shifted into a convalescent home at Otaki about fifty kilometres south of Wellington. Cowan remained there until he died the following year on 6 September 1943. He was aged 73 (Grayland 107).

Because of his ongoing support of Cowan, Fraser seemed well suited to write a foreword marking the passing of Cowan in the first of his books to be published posthumously, called *Tales of the Maori Border* (1944). But it was not just because Fraser was a fan of Cowan's writing; as Prime Minister he could supply a broader view of how Cowan fitted into any national agenda. Indeed, Fraser's one-page eulogy postulated that Cowan had a worldview for his writing, which was a quest for reconciliation between Maori and Pakeha following the New Zealand Wars.

Fraser began by mentioning that Cowan had accumulated a vast treasure of knowledge in his lifetime, but what made him a great New Zealander was not just because of his literary craftsmanship but also because he had 'wrought with his pen a work of noble statesmanship'. Fraser added that '[f]rom the time that he [Cowan] partnered a school pony with a Maori lad of his own age, he saw New Zealand as a whole, a nation whose constituent peoples would dwell together in perfect amity' (Cowan 1944: Foreword). For Fraser, what Cowan was trying to achieve with his writing was what Fraser himself was trying to achieve in the political arena. As Prime Minister, his

working day ran from 6.00am until 1.00am the following morning, seven days a week (Beaglehole 3), during which time he had to balance the twin tasks of dealing with competing local political factions and contributing to world affairs. For Fraser, there was that same ecumenical purpose in Cowan's writing. He portrayed the Maori as more than just stereotypically chivalrous foes in war, and set out upon a lifelong quest for a better understanding between Maori and Pakeha:

He taught the larger lesson of mutual understanding; he saw the two cultures, Maori and Pakeha, meet and clash; he had a profound knowledge of the dignity and beauty of both, and his life was dedicated to their fusion. A right comprehension of the spiritual purpose of James Cowan's writing should help us to make New Zealand, in brotherhood and fellowship, a land with a lesson for mankind (Cowan 1944: Foreword).

Alan Mulgan, 1958

Cowan as a work colleague

Alan Mulgan (1881-1962) began working for the *Auckland Star* as a reporter in 1900 (Jones 1), when Cowan was also working for the *Star* as a reporter (until 1903). Mulgan went on to have a long career with the newspaper, eventually rising up to become literary editor, a chief leader writer and editorial assistant for the editor Thomson Leys. He left in 1935 but has a legacy of twenty books. According to Lawrence Jones, who wrote Mulgan's profile for the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Mulgan wrote 'in a variety of genres including drama, poetry, fiction, autobiography, literary criticism, anthology, travel, essays and history' (Jones 2). Jones added:

Standing between the Victorian and colonial values of his father's contemporaries and the 'modern' nationalistic ideals of his son's [John Mulgan], articulating and trying to reconcile the oppositions, Mulgan was an important transitional figure in New Zealand culture (Jones 2).

For Mulgan, what made Cowan's work unique were his contributions while working as a 'special reporter', which was the byline he received above

certain feature articles. To show just how unique much of Cowan's reporting was, the following excerpt from Mulgan's book *The Making of a New Zealander* (1958) gives us an insight into what normal newspaper coverage entailed during that period:

In those days newspapers were more concerned with little things than they are now. A lot of local news was covered, such as church soirees, that is ignored today. The whole conception of news, however, was narrower. There were fewer of what the newspaperman calls features. ... Interviews were not so common. Indeed, one old hand on the *Star* claimed to have brought in the first interview, and said the sub-editor was a bit suspicious of it (Mulgan 1958: 76-7).

The apparent novelty value of interviews and feature articles is interesting because they were the two areas that would emerge as Cowan's strengths, and would distinguish him from his colleagues. Indeed, Mulgan later lamented that if he had had his time over again as a reporter, he would also have specialized: 'I consider that every journalist should have the widest possible training and experience, but specialize in one or two lines' (1958: 83).

For Mulgan, Cowan's later Maori war history helped fill in a mid-nineteenth century historical void. In *The Making Of A New Zealander*, he reflected on his growing up in the Auckland region during the 1890s. He wrote that as a child he had seen the circular marks left by military tents recently removed from Tauranga during that town's phase of the New Zealand Wars, but there was 'little or no talk of such things' by his elders (Mulgan 1958: 14). For Mulgan, the tendency of life in Katikati, a few kilometres north of Tauranga and where he grew up, 'was to bind us to Britain and her established order: her politics, her Navy and Army, her Empire, her literature, her ways of thought.' He added:

We had no history worth writing about. We did not know that the deeds of American scouts and rangers had been paralleled in our own country, only a few years before our settlement was founded. I did not fully realize this myself till, years afterwards, I read the history of the Maori wars by my friend James Cowan (Mulgan 1958: 30).

A few further anecdotes about Cowan's years at the *Star* can be found in a 1972 profile of Cowan in the book *More Famous New Zealanders* written by Eugene Grayland. A journalist named E. N. G. Poulton, told Grayland that Cowan was 'deft in hitting up a good, crispy half column and was admired for his dexterity and clean copy'. Other observations included that Cowan was unobtrusive and shy:

He found talking in a group trying for he had no small talk. He declined invitations to give addresses, saying: 'Let me stick to my writing.' He was a powerfully built man but gentle in demeanour. 'Jimmy' as those who worked alongside called him would produce colourful stories with a small stump of pencil. When he used a pen he would cut the wooden handle right down to about one inch above the metal nib holder (Grayland 1972: 105).

Michael King, 1983

Cowan as an oral historian

When Michael King (1945-2004) wrote the introduction to the 1983 reissue of *The New Zealand Wars* he labelled Cowan as New Zealand's first practitioner of oral history, basing this assessment on Cowan's research techniques for writing up the wars. He also predicted that Cowan's oral histories would eventually prove valuable:

In some instances – such as the practice of the Hauhau or Pai Marire religion – Cowan sought and recorded information in which other Europeans were not interested at the time, but which became of crucial concern to later historians and anthropologists when the informants themselves were long dead. Cowan also employed what became a standard technique for subsequent gatherers of oral history evidence. He took former combatants back to old battle grounds, to stimulate their recollection and to gain for himself a clearer idea of the course and outcome of the fighting (King in *NZ Wars I*, vi).

For King, Cowan's New Zealand Wars content reflected a preoccupation with *how* the wars happened as opposed to *why*, the *course* of the wars rather

than their causes and consequences (*NZ Wars I*, v). In the process Cowan introduced a completely new way of viewing the wars as a whole. King pointed out Cowan's claim that *The New Zealand Wars* was the first account of *all* the major armed conflicts involving Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand (*NZ Wars I*, v). Previous attempts to write about the wars had covered only individual campaigns, but Cowan ultimately conceived the idea of connecting them all up and actually highlighted his breakthrough in the preface for the *New Zealand Wars* (*NZ Wars I*, xiii).

King also remarked upon the ease with which Cowan had enabled readers to access an historical New Zealand landscape. Cowan's elaborate descriptions of battle site locations meant that the book could be used as a travel guide for the wars. As an example, King reminisced how, as a young boy, he used a copy of the first reprint in 1955 of *The New Zealand Wars* to explore the locations of events that had been recorded as taking place in his neighbourhood:

To my immense joy I found that on the very point on which I lived – then known as Golden Gate – Lieutenant McKillop had run a gunboat ashore, fired on a party led by Rangihaeata, and then been driven off by the Maoris after a hectic engagement. This was my first encounter with the experience described in the hackneyed but wholly apt expression about history coming alive. I felt the presence of people who had gone before; I saw them in a kind of Arthurian world that was not Camelot, but literally on my doorstep. I was ten years old. I have been involved in and by New Zealand history ever since (King in *NZ Wars I*, v).

King added that similar childhood experiences had – thanks to Cowan – been shared by hundreds of readers in other parts of the country (*NZ Wars I*, v).

James Belich, 1986

Cowan as a Victorian-era historian

The New Zealand Wars was reprinted in 1955 and 1983, the second reissue coming out three years before historian James Belich's revisionist history of the wars, called *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (1986). With both books in the marketplace at virtually the same time, a unique opportunity arose to contrast the diverse approaches to those wars by historians from two different eras. Indeed, in many ways the two books complement each other; Belich supplies a scholarly and modern overview and Cowan the impression of 'being there' with his detailed descriptions of every battle.

The subsequent wide readership of Belich's book has ensured that his criticism of Cowan has been far-reaching. But if Belich was to deliver anything new about the wars it had to be an advance on those who wrote about the wars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They consisted mostly of veterans of one campaign or another, who Belich labelled as writers from a Victorian era. Cowan was apparently included as one of those Victorian writers who, according to Belich, mainly saw the wars from the viewpoint of British victors (1986: 12). But Belich was slightly more sympathetic towards Cowan. He wrote that Cowan's work had 'an obvious bias and obvious weaknesses, but to castigate him for being a man of his era is a fruitless exercise' (1986: 16). He added:

Cowan was the product of an intensely Anglocentric, Empire-worshipping period in New Zealand's development, and in this context his balance is quite impressive. He showed a real sympathy for the Maoris, for example in his analysis of the Parihaka incident of 1881, and the Maori veterans trusted him enough to provide him with accounts of their experience (Belich 1986: 16).

Incongruously, despite casting Cowan as a writer locked into a Victorian mindset, Belich next wrote that Cowan looked more to North American influences than to English ones to help him write *The New Zealand Wars*:

His primary objective was to rehabilitate the ‘frontier period’ and the ‘adventure-teeming life of the pioneer colonists’, as an exciting and instructive field of study for the young colonial patriot. Against the prevailing Anglocentric mood, Cowan looked to American rather than British parallels. He set out to show that New Zealand had a Wild West too and, for what it is worth, he succeeded (Belich 1986: 16).

Belich also added that Cowan had ‘a cultural mission in mind’ when at one point he inserted a two-paragraph note on costumes worn by the Maori participants ‘for the guidance of artists who may some day essay to paint the historic scene at Orakau’ (Belich 1986: 16; *NZ Wars I*, 394). However, what Belich fails to mention about this small artistic flourish is that the chapter on the Battle of Orakau, as well as chapters leading up to it, consist almost entirely of oral and documentary histories collected by Cowan (Chapters 36-39). By pouncing on one tiny moment of digression by Cowan, Belich has ignored the larger conceptual focus surrounding it.

However, in fairness to Belich, who is largely supportive of Cowan in much of his writing, and to avoid taking his comments out of context, his views will be discussed in more detail later, in my chapters on *The New Zealand Wars*.

Peter Gibbons, 1991

Cowan’s vision for a distinctive local literature

In 1991 Peter Gibbons wrote in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* of an attempt by Cowan to promote a distinctively New Zealand literature in an article he wrote for *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine*. In that 1901 article Cowan promoted the creation of a New Zealand literature by the inclusion of firstly, more Maori content, and secondly, the New Zealand landscape, as subject matter. Cowan believed that such an approach would have a cumulative effect in New Zealand similar to the impact that writers in the United States had during their early nationalist period, Gibbons wrote. He added that Cowan remained faithful to those aims, restating them as late in his writing career as 1935 in his book *Hero Stories of New Zealand* (Gibbons in Sturm 62-3). For Gibbons, Cowan had plotted his ‘New Zealand’ so that conflict

between Maori and settler was seen as ‘formative rather than destructive’. So any Pakeha who had managed to cross the cultural divide between Maori and Pakeha – like the army deserter Kimble Bent in Cowan’s 1911 book *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* – was celebrated rather than censured by Cowan (Gibbons in Sturm: 64).

However, it would seem virtually impossible to prove that a writer *consciously* inserted New Zealand material when writing about a story that already had a New Zealand setting, like in *The Adventures of Kimble Bent*. As well, the treatment of Bent in that story by his Maori masters could hardly be termed a *celebration* of crossing any cultural divide, but more of a warning not to. Nevertheless, the idea by Gibbons that Cowan saw the New Zealand Wars as ‘formative rather than destructive’ bears some similarity to Peter Fraser’s concept of Cowan’s worldview over half a century earlier, when Fraser postulated that much of Cowan’s writing was a quest for reconciliation following the New Zealand Wars (Cowan 1944: Foreword). Consequently, two writers in our survey have now touched on the concept of Cowan having a long-term vision for his work, albeit very different visions.

Chris Hilliard, 2006

Cowan as an historical journalist

In 2006 Chris Hilliard compared Cowan with other writers and journalists of his era in *The Bookmen’s Dominion: Cultural Life in New Zealand 1920-1950*. In his book Hilliard looked at Cowan as part of a community of writers and non-academic historians, that is, historians working outside of the university, who were based in Wellington and whose research revolved around access to government archives and the Alexander Turnbull Library. For Hilliard, two of the more ‘ambitious’ historians were Cowan and T. Lindsay Buick, who were more concerned with wider stories of New Zealand history than the largely regional focus of the other writers (Hilliard 51).

Two interesting insights Hilliard offers about Cowan concern, firstly, his perception of his own writing and the unity of those close to him, and secondly, insights into his methodology. Firstly, regarding Cowan’s perception of his own writing, according to Cowan’s widow, Eileen, who he married in

1913 (Colquhoun 1), Cowan was always ‘a journalist first’. In her letter to journalist Eric Ramsden in 1944 (Hilliard 127, n43), Eileen wrote:

The real reason for his books was to embody all his writings in a permanent form. We had many arguments about the same thing, he used to get very annoyed when I called him a true journalist, but it wasn't derogatory. He was unsettled in his mind until he had seen the *Dominion* and discovered something upon which to comment, he didn't take up the current chapter of his book until he had got a column or less off to the *Star*. Newspapers interested him more than anything, holidays when no paper arrived, were simply disgusting to Jim, he railed all day (Hilliard 2006: 68).

The fact that Cowan became annoyed when his wife called him ‘a true journalist’ indicates that Cowan saw himself as something more. He was always ready to post off a column to a newspaper, which meant that he perceived his reputation to be of sufficient standing to justify a comment.

Finally, regarding Cowan's book methodology, Eileen's comment about Cowan wanting to embody his writings in book form suggests that he and/or his publishers considered his newspaper stories unique enough for there to be a market for a reprinting of them as anthologies, as work-in-progress in any particular subject area. Anthologies are a common vehicle to reprise the work of those who write shorter pieces, like poets, essayists and short story writers. Anthologies might be more common today than they were in Cowan's era, but Cowan did not hide what he was doing. For example, he wrote in the preface to *Tales of the Maori Bush* that most of the stories in the book first appeared in three newspapers, the *Auckland Star*, *Christchurch Times* or *Canterbury Times* (Cowan 2006: 14). Indeed, some of the human subjects of Cowan's anthologies might have relished the idea of being ‘immortalised’ in book form. And Hilliard later pointed out that journalism was poorly paid. He wrote that ‘Cowan most likely could not spare the time and expense to edit out the traces of prior publication and have a manuscript typed again as he readied a book for publication’ (Hilliard 2006: 70).

II. Discussion of Methodology

So where do the views mentioned in the Literature Survey leave us in our understanding of James Cowan? To begin with, most of the critics show a reluctance to accord Cowan the status of historian without including qualifying terms because Cowan worked primarily as a journalist during a period when journalism as a profession was at a rudimentary stage. For example, Belich has argued that his revisionist history *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (1986) was a huge advance on any writing from Cowan's own era, although he obviously drew upon Cowan's *The New Zealand Wars* to write it. He did, however, grant Cowan a two-paragraph mention in his book, which was two paragraphs more than any other writer from that era received.

But if it can be demonstrated that Cowan was a cut above the typical journalist from his era, perhaps it will help us see that the next step to his writing history was not such a huge jump up because he was already thinking at a level beyond the daily requirements for a working journalist. For example, two of the commentators in our Literature Survey saw evidence of a long-term vision by Cowan. Peter Fraser saw in Cowan's writing a quest for reconciliation between Maori and Pakeha following the strife caused by the New Zealand Wars. Peter Gibbons offered evidence of a drive by Cowan to create a distinctive New Zealand literature by the inclusion of more indigenous content.

However, if are to test Cowan's candidacy as an historian, we have to decide if any of his books before *The New Zealand Wars* could be called histories. Accordingly, the focus of this thesis will be on his historical works during a twenty-year period between 1906 and 1926 – from when he had just begun writing books until a few years after the release of *The New Zealand Wars*. It would be tempting to contrast these works with those within his other subject areas of the sea, Maori folklore, children's books and travel writing, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. [See Appendix A2 for a breakdown of Cowan's subject matter by themes.]

So the main question that this thesis seeks to answer is: Does *The New Zealand Wars* show evidence of a coherent historiography in Cowan's past

before and *after* the date of its release? If not, then the dismissive comments of later writers are perhaps justified. However, if he *does* show evidence, then he could be seen as an unjustly neglected pioneer New Zealand historian.

To begin our study, I will briefly summarise the writing of history in New Zealand before and after the First World War. Next, I will look at Cowan's early years and antecedents to see if there is evidence of Cowan somehow being unique by virtue of his upbringing, his surroundings, or his contacts. Were there key events during his youth that offer up clues to his later direction as a writer?

Chapter Three continues chronologically and looks at two key texts that Cowan wrote between 1906 and 1911 [*The Maoris of New Zealand* (1910) and *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* (1911)] as early histories of the New Zealand Wars.

Chapter Four examines *The New Zealand Wars* and Chapter Five at later developments, including Cowan's book *The Maoris in the Great War* (1926), to see if Peter Fraser's concept of Cowan seeking reconciliation between Maori and Pakeha was fulfilled. There was certainly little sign of reconciliation immediately following the New Zealand Wars. Chapter Six is my conclusion.

A key tool for this study is my *revised* version of Cowan's bibliography. Cowan's work is so disparate that the only way to uncover the patterns in his work was through an orderly list of his books and periodicals. Fortunately, in 1941 the head librarian at Wellington's Alexander Turnbull Library, Clyde Taylor, typed up a bibliography of Cowan's 43 books, plus a tally of 370 feature articles that had been published in journals, magazines or newspapers. I have taken Taylor's bibliography a step further and rewritten it into *chronological* order (it was initially produced in *alphabetical* order) and it appears in the thesis as Appendix A (book titles only). Appendix B divides the list into subject areas. It also goes beyond 1941 to include Cowan's books published posthumously. My revised list helps reveal themes and patterns in Cowan's oeuvre that had been obscured while his bibliography was in alphabetical order. We can now adopt a chronological study of Cowan's literary output and draw out some of his other significant works languishing in the shadow of *The New Zealand Wars*.

2

Cowan in Context

**I. New Zealand Historiography
Before and After the First World War**

This segment aims to position Cowan in a wider New Zealand historiography by looking at the writing of non-fiction from the second half of the nineteenth century until the mid-1920s. The choice of these time parameters is because that was the time when Cowan published four books comprising his own historiography (which are reviewed in the following chapters). During that time period, two writing trends emerged, the first in the 1890s, which affected non-fiction writing in general, and the second in the 1920s, which affected academic writing, especially the writing of history. That is according to the historians Keith Sinclair and Peter Gibbons, whose outlines of these trends and their consequences are looked at next.

A significant early study of New Zealand historiography was by Keith Sinclair (1922-93), when in 1966 he contributed a chapter on New Zealand for *The Historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth*. In his chapter Sinclair believed that his was only the second attempt at writing an historiography on New Zealand (174).² He identified five areas that were the most popular for early writing studies. They were (i) the actual process of settlement, (ii) the development of New Zealand as an independent state, (iii) Maori history, (iv) Maori-Pakeha relations, and (v) what it meant to be a New Zealander (174-5).

Of these early studies, Sinclair's favourite books included the first general history of New Zealand, *The Story of New Zealand* (1859) by Arthur S. Thomson, which Sinclair liked because of Thomson's impartiality and his drawing upon previously unpublished records. John Gorst's *The Maori King* (1864) also appealed as a 'remarkable' account of race relations, along with Lady Mary Barker's two books on life on a Canterbury sheep station (1870 & 1873) for their 'intimate pictures of early settlers'. There were a handful of others,

² The first attempt was by Trevor Wilson, according to Sinclair, who had written 'The Writing of History in New Zealand' for *Landfall* in 1955 (Sinclair in Winks 174).

but Sinclair was concerned that the majority of nineteenth-century books were laced with propaganda of varying degrees, a typical example being Edward Jerningham Wakefield's *Adventure in New Zealand* (1845), which meant that many of the early contributions had to be read with a degree of scepticism (174-5).

For Sinclair, the most outstanding book of the nineteenth century was William Pember Reeves's *The Long White Cloud* (1898), because it brought together in a single text the 'main traditions of New Zealand historical interpretation' up to that time (176). Those traditions included 'a slightly sentimental yet genuine respect for the Maori people', an 'exaggerated importance' given to affairs of the New Zealand Company, ancestor worship, and finally, the assumption that imperial expansion had merit. Reeves provided an intelligent and coherent interpretation of the colony's history, Sinclair added, which was widely accepted 'and scarcely questioned for years' (177).

Reeves, like Cowan, belongs to the generation following Arthur Thomson, a generation of mostly New Zealand-born writers who worked between 1890 and 1930, a period which was initially marked by a shift in the approach to writing about what it meant to be a New Zealander. According to Peter Gibbons in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (1991) the 1886 census revealed for the first time that the majority of the population was New Zealand-born rather than immigrants (Gibbons in Sturm 55). This generation grew up with a totally different perception of what represented 'Home' to their immigrant parents. Gibbons added:

A considerable amount of non-fiction writing from the 1890s is concerned with fabricating New Zealand by creating an inventory of its phenomena. The 'native-born' colonists were trying to depict themselves as indigenous people. To 'belong' in New Zealand they must regard the place and its phenomena not as alien but as normal. The earlier colonial attitude, on the other hand, had been to normalize New Zealand by destroying what was 'alien' (i.e., indigenous) and substituting in the space left by this destruction the social and material forms of the metropolitan world (Gibbons in Sturm 55).

Gibbons wrote five chapters on New Zealand non-fiction for *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, his chapters recognising many writers as

having made unique contributions in their chosen fields even if they were later considered only minor contributors to a New Zealand literary history. To do this, Gibbons created a thematic timeline from 1642 (the arrival of Tasman) until the late 1990s. His first chapter was called 'The Archive of Exploration, 1642-1840', which was followed by 'The Literature of Invasion, 1840-1890', 'The Literature of Occupation, 1890-1930', and finally 'From National Identity to Post-colonial Perspectives, 1930s-1990s'. His final chapter dealt with biography and autobiography. Within each chapter Gibbons grouped writers based on their primary study area. For example, Cowan was grouped in Chapter Three, 'The Literature of Occupation, 1890-1930', as a researcher of old-time Maori under a sub-heading of 'The Maori as he was', along with John White, Edward Tregear, S. Percy Smith and Elsdon Best (Gibbons in Sturm 55-64).

The end result was a voluminous and valuable collection of assorted writers who were allocated different places based on their writing specialty. But for Sinclair, only a few non-fiction books from this later part of the nineteenth century until the 1920s were of any scholarly interest. 'Most have been amateurish,' he wrote in *The Historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth*, 'their authors lacked the background knowledge and training necessary to see their subjects in perspective or to scrutinize evidence critically. Until the 1920s virtually no thorough research had been carried out, and a negligible number of detailed studies had been published' (Sinclair in Winks 1966: 174).

Cowan occupies a transitory position here. He wrote two books in his historiography before the First World War and two books after the war. He might have been an 'amateur' under Sinclair's definition of writers before the First World War, however it must be remembered that early historical writers like Cowan and Lindsay T. Buick were at a distinct disadvantage when compared with researchers writing after the war. Both Cowan and Buick were writing in the two decades before the Alexander Turnbull Library opened in Wellington in 1918. Its massive Pacific collection and orderly file management under the guidance of the head librarian, Johannes Andersen, was an obvious boon for later researchers. So, instead of criticising the early historians [pre-1918] for their crude research methods, it is quite an amazing at what *was* achieved before the Turnbull opened. For example, from as early as 1900 Lindsay T. Buick, the closest contemporary to Cowan in terms of historical

writing, had been writing substantial histories that included conflicts between Maori and Pakeha, his books including *Old Marlborough* (1900), *Old Manawatu* (1903), *Te Rauparaha: An Old New Zealander* (1911) and *The Treaty of Waitangi* (1914). The main difference between Buick and Cowan was that Buick wrote mainly regional histories whereas Cowan was much more focused around the New Zealand Wars.

The major change in New Zealand historiography occurred after the First World War, according to Sinclair in *The Historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth*, where he wrote:

After World War I the process of research (though 'search' would be a more accurate term in this case) began. It was conducted by young men, trained in history in New Zealand and British universities. All of them except Johannes S. Marais, a South African, were New Zealanders. Their writings illuminated (if that does not suggest too dazzling achievement) the 1920s, which were in general dim years in New Zealand literature (Sinclair in Winks 1966: 178).

Sinclair added that 'the first scholarly monograph published on New Zealand history was probably Angus John Harrop's *England and New Zealand: From Tasman to the Taranaki War* (London 1926)', before going on to list a few other standouts of that decade (178). Sinclair's list is almost identical to that of Giselle Byrnes in her opening chapter for *The New Oxford History of New Zealand* (2009), where she outlines a historiography of New Zealand books dealing specifically with 'general history'. However, Cowan cannot be excluded from this group. Byrnes includes *Maori and Pakeha*, which was co-written by Alan Mulgan and A. W. Shrimpton (Byrnes 5). Cowan wrote a segment on the New Zealand Wars for this general history, as he was the authority on that subject by the time the book was published in 1921.

What was the new formula for writing history, then, that differentiated books written after the 1920s from their predecessors? According to Chris Hilliard in *The Bookmen's Dominion* (2006), the new era was to be marked by scholarly historical writing that was intended to be 'sober, judicious and based on substantial quantities of evidence' (91). He added:

Academic history was also written in a different way. Whether it took the form of an essay arguing a case, or a book-length narrative, reputable history should set episodes in the context of an interpretation. Details and anecdotes should be marshalled in the service of the broader argument, rather than luxuriated in for their own sake. It is not coincidental that Cowan and his ilk tended to quote slabs of their source material whereas university-trained historians quoted more sparingly and subordinated the quotations to the authoritative 'voice' of the historian. The academics strove to make an argument; for the bookmen, that impulse jostled with the desire to preserve their subjects' own voice. (Hilliard 2006: 92-3).

The key point here is that academic writing had evolved into a genre, a distinctive way of writing. Being recognised as an academic now meant conforming to a particular writing style. Academic history writing targeted one's peers, not the general public, and there were few of them to start with. Sinclair wrote that at the time of writing his historiography [1966] the first generation of professional historians were still living. 'The breed is still scarce,' he added, 'though increasing: there are now more historians at the University of Auckland (some sixteen) than there were in the country twenty-five years ago' (Sinclair in Winks 174).

But Sinclair's remark about the 1920s being 'in general dim years in New Zealand literature' (174) must be challenged. Having already dismissed most of the non-scholastic historical writers as amateurs he ignores some of the epic non-fiction texts that emerged in the 1920s: *Tutira* (1920) by Herbert Guthrie-Smith, and *Tuhoe: Children of the Mist* (1925) by Elsdon Best. As well, Buick published his first war history in 1926, *New Zealand's First War*, which looked at Hone Heke and the War in the North, and was followed by *The French at Akaroa* in 1928. Cowan also published two major works, *The New Zealand Wars* (1922-23) and *The Maoris in the Great War* (1926). All of these books have been reprinted since being first published, some more than once, which implies a demand for New Zealand histories accessible to the general reader even if they were not scholastic.³

³ Ironically, Sinclair's most popular book was *A History of New Zealand* (1959), which targeted a general audience and has been deemed a classic, a revised version of which is still in print.

In order to deflect some of Sinclair's criticism away from Cowan, he should best be viewed from his specialty area as a war historian, based on his war historiography. In this sphere his contribution has been viewed more favourably, as pointed out below by James Belich and Ian McGibbon.

Firstly, according to Belich in the *Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History* (2000), which was edited by McGibbon, the New Zealand Wars were surrounded by a 'vigorous' nineteenth century literature. Belich cites three relevant books, *Remarks on the Military Operations in New Zealand* (1853) by T. B. Collinson, *History of the War in the North* (1862) by Frederick Maning, and *The Life of Henry Williams* (1874) by Hugh Carlton. For Belich, the books presented a 'minority view' that doubted a British victory following the War in the North. However, their viewpoints were 'shunted aside by the majority interpretation' that there *was* a British victory (Belich in McGibbon 2000: 384).

In the 1860s a second strand of opinion emerged touting the superiority of New Zealand colonial fighters over their British army counterparts. William Fox supported the view in his book *The War in New Zealand* (1866), while Colonel James Alexander defended his British army personnel in his book *Bush Fighting* (1873), pointing out the British army's long experience in all types of terrain, both in New Zealand and overseas (Belich in McGibbon 2000: 384a). Cowan would later point out the strengths of both types of soldier in his introductory chapter for *The New Zealand Wars* (NZ Wars I, 2).

A key point to emerge from Belich's comments is that he saw value in the different approaches each book took towards the wars, including Cowan's *The New Zealand Wars*, which Belich described as '[a]n important military study' (Belich in McGibbon 2000: 384b). Their unique viewpoints helped Belich coalesce his massive contribution to New Zealand war historiography, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (1986).

For Ian McGibbon, Cowan had provided a valuable war history when he wrote *The New Zealand Wars* because it was completed without undue interference, which was a common and debilitating feature during the production of other early war histories in New Zealand. In his 2005 essay called 'Something of them is here recorded',⁴ McGibbon pointed out the

⁴ Originally published in the *Contributions to the Study of World History* series. Connecticut: Preager Publishers, 2003.

interference by the Defence Department in writing the history of the First World War. The army wanted a history that could be used as a training manual for soldiers, whereas the commissioned writers (one who actually witnessed the failed Gallipoli campaign) wanted to write a popular history. The resulting delays meant that an official history came out long after individual accounts had been published, which meant that the First World War was being remembered more through the popular versions rather than the official histories (McGibbon 2005: 3-6). Fortunately, Cowan was saved from such interference by writing his war history volumes under the auspices of the more benign Internal Affairs Department, instead of the Defence Department.

Finally, it was not until the 1950s that Byrnes suggests the writing of New Zealand history emerged from under the blanket of an English imperial history, which up to that time had acted as virtually a *de facto* version of New Zealand's history. Byrnes cites Keith Sinclair and W. H. Oliver as the vanguard historians who helped reframe a New Zealand history that focused on New Zealand as a nation with its own identity rather than as a satellite of Britain (Byrnes 6). This helps us partially understand why Sinclair was so scathing of early historians because of their apparent, but probably unwitting, imperial bias, and his subsequent desire to reset the political mindset of a modern New Zealand landscape.

This drive to reinterpret the writing of historiography since the 1950s also helps us understand how Belich's 1986 *The New Zealand Wars* can be seen as a *revisionist* history because it embodies a changed outlook free of any earlier imperial mindset or trappings. Early writers were no longer a threat to modern history writing because they occupied a different position and viewpoint in time. They could even be praised if they were seen to have deserved it. For example, in 1999 Belich wrote in *The Oxford History of the British Empire* that Cowan and Buick 'skilfully wrote up iconic events' [referring to Buick's *The Treaty of Waitangi* and Cowan's *The New Zealand Wars*] (Belich in Winks 1999: 186). But he carefully added:

These writers pursued a partly nationalist project, asserting the fascinations of New Zealand's own past to an unconvinced present. But they achieved wide acceptance when they endorsed and adumbrated cherished myths such as the

co-option of Maori and the exclusion of Australia. New Zealand, wrote Cowan, 'has a history. Australia has none.' He enshrined racial harmony, forged in heroic and chivalrous battle, as a symbol of a new nation, echoed by *Our Nation's Story* [a 1920's Standard Three history reader] and A. H. Reed in [*The*] *Story of New Zealand* [1945]. These are intriguing analogies in the English co-option of Celtic resistance history, as with the Arthurian legend, and the 'invention' of Highland Scotland (Belich in Winks 1999: 186).

In short, thanks to modern reinterpretations by a later generation of historians, we can now 'read' Cowan and Buick as historical writers belonging to a distinct era. Their histories are no longer competing with later interpretations, but they cannot be completely ignored either. Their uniqueness lies in a closer proximity to what they wrote about than following generations.

*

II. Cowan's Early Life and Antecedents

In this segment we explore Cowan's early life up to the age of seventeen by returning to his 'story-ground' as he once put it (1930: xvii), the world of his youth. No definitive autobiographies or biographies exist of Cowan's youth, so it is a matter of drawing upon Paul Colquhoun's profile of Cowan in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* plus Cowan's own recollections in his books *The Old Frontier* (1922) and *Legends of the Maori* (1930). *The Old Frontier* was a regional history of the Waipa Valley, which Cowan grew up in and was located in the Waikato River basin about thirty kilometres south of Hamilton. *Legends of the Maori* was an anthology of Maori folklore, in which Cowan mentions his youth in an introductory chapter called 'The Gathering of the Legends'. The mention is possibly loaded with the colouring of the past that memoirs are notorious for, but we at least we get some idea of what Cowan considered to be the significant aspects of his past.

James Cowan was born on 14 April 1870 at the coastal settlement of Pākura, which lay only a few bays southeast of the then colonial town of Auckland. His father was William Andrew Cowan (1839-1913) from County Down in Ireland. His mother was Elizabeth Jane Qualtrough (1838-1918) from the Isle of Man. The couple married in New Zealand in 1866 (Colquhoun 1). An online family tree of Qualtrough descendents in New Zealand shows that Elizabeth bore seven sons, all of them born within a decade of each other, James being the eldest.⁵

Shortly after James was born, the family moved to a farm located at Orakau in the Waipa Valley. Orakau appears as a locality on some modern maps while others merely list the larger nearby township of Kihikihi and the regional centre of Te Awamutu, which were already established as settlements when the Cowans arrived. In his book *Tales of the Maori Bush*, which first came out in 1934, Cowan wrote that '[o]ur home was built among the peach groves and almond trees of the old mission days; we lived on the site of a deserted village and wheat farm and the orchards of the defeated but unconquerable Maori' (2006: 184). Cowan's reference to the 'defeated but unconquerable Maori' was because the Cowan farm, along with scores of surrounding ones, was one of the spoils of the Waikato War.

⁵ www.qualtrough.org/charts/Chart4.pdf

The Waikato War of 1863-64 took place about halfway through the New Zealand Wars, which started in the 1840s and were only beginning to peter out in the early 1870s, when James was still very young. When the Waikato campaign ended in a British victory, soldiers who had fought in it – like William Cowan – were granted land confiscated from their Maori opponents (Colquhoun 1). According to Michael King, the confiscated land was chosen more for its fertility and strategic importance than whether its owners had actually taken part in any conflict (2008: 50). Ultimately, many of the holdings proved either too small for practical farming or the lifestyle did not suit. By 1880 only a few hundred military settlers remained out of the two thousand-odd who had been granted farms in the Waikato (McGibbon 2000: 327a). However the Cowans appeared to prosper. Within five years of their arrival, their farm of ‘300 acres’ carried 260 head of cattle, 350 sheep, and ten horses and colts (*Waikato Times*, 10/08/1875).

Four kilometres south of Orakau flowed the Puniu River, its course marking a military border ever since the end of the Waikato War (Colquhoun 1). The presence of this border is what makes James Cowan so special as a writer: for the first decade of his life he grew up amidst an imposed physical division of the races. Europeans held the northern side of the river and Maori the southern side, which was known as the King Country (Colquhoun 1). In his book *The Old Frontier* Cowan supplied a graphic description of what the sight of the King Country on the other side of the Puniu River represented to a young boy growing up close to it. He wrote:

Looking southward across the Puniu in the Seventies and early Eighties we who were bred up on the Frontier saw a mysterious-appearing land, fascinating to the imagination because unknown – a land, too, of dread in the years of unrest, for there in the hinterland only a few miles from the border river lived Te Kooti and his band and the hundreds of Waikato dispossessed of their good lands on which we Pakeha families now dwelt. As far as the eye could range it was a land altogether given up to the Kingites and Hauhaus – an untamed country painted in the dark purple of broken mountain ranges, merging into the vague, misty blues of great distance, the sombre green of ferny hills and plains, and the yellow and white of deep flax and raupo swamps. Clear, dashing hill-streams and lazy, swamp-born watercourses, alive

with eels and wild duck, all carrying down their quota to feed the silently-gliding Waipa [River]. And over all, from Maungatautari's shapelessly rugged mass along the curving sector to Pirongia's fairy-haunted peaks, an aspect and air of solitude; a suggestion of mystery and waiting for the touch of man which was to transform that far-stretching waste (Cowan 1922:84).

Cowan's final comment about the land across the Puniu 'waiting for the touch of man which was to transform that far-stretching waste' implies that he believed that the King Country was languishing while its people denied access to Europeans, who could have transformed it into productive land. But he was expressing a viewpoint belonging to the period when he was looking across the river in the 1870s, not when he wrote *The Old Frontier* in 1922.

In 1881 the veil that had shrouded the southern side of the Puniu for almost twenty years began to part. Cowan wrote in *The Old Frontier* that the two worlds finally came together when on 11 July 1881 several hundred Maori swarmed across the Puniu River accompanying Tawhiao, the Maori King (hence the name King Country), who had come to make peace with the Pakeha. In a ceremony at the Alexandra stockade near the foot of Mount Pirongia, Tawhiao laid down his gun before the Government's local Native Officer, Major William Mair, and stated that there would be no more fighting by his followers (Cowan 1922: 91).

Cowan does not state in *The Old Frontier*, or in any of his books for that matter, whether he was actually present for any of this. Kihikihi was six kilometres northwest of the Cowan farm and Mount Pirongia about ten kilometres west. If the peace ceremony had been advertised as a major celebratory event for the region, chances are that Cowan could have been present for some of the celebrations, which lasted a week based around Kihikihi (Cowan 1922: 92). Otherwise, he could have drawn upon newspaper coverage by the *Waikato Times*. Alternatively, Cowan's father probably attended in a ceremonial capacity as a lieutenant in the Waikato Cavalry unit formed since 1871 specifically to police the border (Cowan 1922: 86-87). So there was a strong chance that Cowan junior might have tagged along.

Fortunately, we *do* know that he was the sole witness of a key event that took place next to his father's farm around this time. Just exactly *when* it happened is not known, but obviously it took place once freedom of access had

been granted across the Puniu River, which would place it circa 1881, when Cowan would have been aged eleven onwards. The incident was significant enough for Cowan to later use it for the opening paragraphs of *Legends in the Maori*, where he wrote of playing in his father's orchard when a group of Maori horseback riders pulled up:

A group of mounted Maori, most of them old men with tattoo-carved faces halted on the gentle mound of Rangataua, at Orakau, where the waggon road ran, and gazed about them over the green farm lands that sloped easily to the bush and the raupo swamps. One of them pointed to this place and that; he was reconstructing for his companions an episode of the past. As I watched them over the hedge from the peach-grove I heard one of the grim old warriors begin a wavering chant, a song that rose and fell in slow cadences of sorrow. Presently the others joined him and they chanted all together, and tears flowed down their chisel-trenched, blue-scrolled cheeks as they sang. I did not know then what they chanted, but I knew this much, that they were mourning for Orakau (Cowan 1930: xvii).

Cowan's reference to the old Maori men 'mourning for Orakau' refers to the Battle of Orakau, which lasted three days from 31 March to 2 April 1864, and marked the end of the military campaign around the Waikato basin. Eighty Maori warriors were killed and half that number wounded, according to James Belich in *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Military History*. In comparison, only seventeen British soldiers were killed but about fifty wounded. Belich attributed the high Maori death rate to their being bayoneted while they lay wounded on the ground, 'not an uncommon practice on either side,' he added (Belich in McGibbon 2000: 377-8). Shortly after the battle, British troops levelled the pa, burying some of the dead warriors inside it and others in an outer trench. The latter grave resulted in a distinctive mound of earth marking where about forty Maori corpses had been laid, around which William Cowan later erected a picket fence (*NZ Wars I*, 401-2, 406n). This presumably was 'the gentle mound of Rangataua', where the Maori riders had halted while Cowan watched from the concealment of his father's orchard.

Legends of the Maori reveals Cowan's *earliest* motivation to ultimately specialize in writing about nineteenth century New Zealand race relations, for in the book he went on to explain that within a few years of watching the incident he began to collect local folklore and learn the Maori language (Cowan 1930: xvii). It was as if that encounter with the old warriors while they sang a tangi [lament for the dead] had signalled a life's calling. For Cowan added that in the following years he would hear many a tangi chanted in earnest, 'but youthful impressions are the most vivid and the longest-lived, and memory often goes back in a flash to that little group of King Country men, patriots who fought for a hopeless cause, keening their dirge, like a Highland piper's lament, on the place of a hundred dead' (Cowan 1930: xvii).

So what conclusions can we draw from this brief and selective look at Cowan's youth? Were there key events during his youth that offered up clues to his later career direction as a journalist? Firstly, one cannot help but feel overawed by the discovery of exactly where Cowan grew up. He lived on confiscated land in apparently peaceful rural surroundings, but nearby was a mass grave, 'the gentle mound of Rangataua', the presence of which no doubt set up bewildering interpretations for a young boy about the price to be paid for European settlement in New Zealand: Who were these people who had fought to the death on his father's farm and now lived on the other side of the river, which one was forbidden to cross? And then one day the river was forbidden no more and the people from that land crossed over to pay homage to their fallen kin at 'the gentle mound of Rangataua'. All alone in the peach orchard, Cowan eavesdropped on a poignant ceremony, a tangi, and observed a grief so deep that he determined to learn the Maori language and start gathering their folklore.

It is a heartfelt story and supplies the earliest known motivation for that quest for reconciliation between Maori and Pakeha following the New Zealand Wars, which Peter Fraser suggested in his foreword to *Tales of the Maori Border* (1944) was the main driving force behind Cowan's writing.

3

Approaches to the Wars**I. *The Maoris of New Zealand* (1910)**

In this chapter we look at the writing of two important books by Cowan, *The Maoris of New Zealand* (1910) and *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* (1911). The significance of these books is that they represent the founding texts in Cowan's New Zealand Wars historiography, as they gave him the first opportunity to write about aspects of the wars in book form. Both books incorporate material from Cowan's earliest journalism stretching as far back as 1887, when he left the family farm to work for the *Auckland Star*. The books were written after Cowan left the *Star* and moved to Wellington in 1903, during a period when colonialism was in its zenith.⁶ While working as a government writer Cowan was no doubt immersed in that political ethos, for, as mentioned earlier by Belich, 'Cowan was the product of an intensely Anglocentric, Empire-worshipping period in New Zealand's development'; he had 'an obvious bias and obvious weaknesses, but to castigate him for being a man of his era is a fruitless exercise' (1986: 16).

The move to Wellington was so that Cowan could take up a position writing for the newly created Department of Tourist and Health Resorts, which had been formed in 1901 and was apparently the first government department in the world to be created exclusively to promote tourism (Atkinson 104). Cowan moved to Wellington with his wife Eunice, the daughter of a Niue Island settler. The couple had married in Auckland in 1894 but little is recorded about the relationship except that they had no children (Colquhoun 1). According to a profile of Cowan by Eugene Grayland in his book *More Famous New Zealanders* (1972), Cowan was invited to take up the Wellington position by the then Prime Minister Joseph Ward, who had read Cowan's articles in the *Auckland Star*. Grayland added:

⁶ 'Colonialism' def.: 'The policy or practice of acquiring political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically' (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Soanes & Stevenson, 282).

Cowan naturally accepted this remarkable opportunity to travel widely and write about New Zealand's glories for overseas readers. He was given a fairly free hand and for seven years travelled all over the country, turning out a constant stream of articles, pamphlets and books that formed the basis of the state publicity scheme (Grayland 105).

That 'fairly free hand' given to Cowan to collect other material not immediately beneficial as government propaganda, might help explain why Cowan took such a position as publicist for the state.

In 1907 Cowan's material was gathered into a book called *New Zealand, or Ao-Tea-Roa (The Long Bright World): Its Wealth and Resources, Scenery, Travel-Routes, Spas and Sport*. As can be seen from its extended title, the book was much more than a travel guide; it was an intensive public relations push to spur investment and emigration to New Zealand. Cowan's copy was packed with advertorial that sometimes went to disturbing levels to celebrate government achievements. For example in 1904, while gathering material, Cowan toured Taranaki on horseback and called in on the Maori village of Parihaka lying at the foot of Mount Egmont/Taranaki. Parihaka was the base for the now-aged prophet Erueti Te Whiti-o-Rongomai III, who entertained Cowan and let him sleep overnight (NZRM, Oct 1934: 17-18). But three years later, when Cowan wrote about Te Whiti and his followers in *New Zealand, or Ao-Tea-Roa*, he described them as a community living in the past:

On the opposite coast of the North Island, in Taranaki, under the shadow of Egmont's snowy cone, is a large community of Natives who still cling to anti-European ideals, but who, fortunately for Europeans and themselves, content them with 'passive resistance' to the on-sweep of the Pakeha. These are chiefly the followers of Te Whiti, the Prophet of the Mountain, and many of them are congregated in the large Native Township of Parihaka. Te Whiti still poses as a prophet and medicine-man, and there are large gatherings at his periodical meetings – a quaint medley of semi-Scriptural prophesying, and feasting, and poi-dancing – but his 'mana' is no longer what it was, and, to use his own oracular phrase on a certain historic occasion in the troublesome times of a quarter-century ago, his 'potato is cooked' (Cowan 1907: 63).

Cowan's mention of 'the troublesome times of a quarter-century ago' in the quote refers to the invasion of Parihaka on 5 November 1881, when 1500 Armed Constabulary and Volunteer Corps marched into Parihaka to demolish it as a Maori place of assembly. Previously, the Parihaka residents had been resisting attempts to survey parts of their land for European settlement by ploughing on the disputed parts. Some of the homes at Parihaka were subsequently pulled down and crops destroyed and Te Whiti was arrested and detained for two years without a trial (*NZ Wars II*, 485-488; Keenan 3). He eventually returned to the settlement in 1883, and the tactic of 'protesting by ploughing' was periodically resorted to by his followers well into the late 1890s in protest at the long delays in resolving Maori land rights in Taranaki (Keenan 4).

In contrast to the stand by Te Whiti's followers, Cowan wrote in *New Zealand, or Ao-Tea-Roa* of another tribe, the Ngati Porou, who lived on the East Coast and had embraced Pakeha ways, to their apparent benefit:

The Ngati Porou are now led by educated young chiefs, and are becoming prosperous wool-growers and cattle-raisers. These people are alive to the advantages of many a Pakeha innovation, and have lately shown their white friends an example of enterprise and self-reliance by erecting at their own expense about a hundred miles of telephone-wire connecting their principal village (Cowan 1907: 63).

However, the comparatively isolated lands of the Ngati Porou never experienced the coveting as potential settler territory like the more centralised and fertile Taranaki soil. Surely Cowan would have known that as an authority on the New Zealand Wars, so why did he treat Te Whiti and the lot of the Parihaka residents with so much disdain in *New Zealand, or Ao-Tea-Roa*? Te Whiti had once welcomed Cowan and entertained him with his troupe of dancers, who had elevated the use of the poi in dance to a high Maori art form. The answer was that when Cowan was writing *New Zealand, or Ao-Tea-Roa* he was obliged to present the country as a 'Brighter Britain', a seemingly fantastic and progressive Pacific Shangri La with 'solid advantages for the farmer, for the health-seeker, and for those who, weary of Northern fogs and Northern frosts and Old-World conditions of life' (Cowan 1907: 2). Although Te Whiti

and his followers had been living under those seemingly beautified conditions for decades, they had not reaped the harvest as other tribes had because of ongoing protests against the Government that could be traced back to the invasion of Parihaka by government troops in 1881. Cowan wrote of Te Whiti as if he was an alien to those outside his immediate village, resisting progress. Even his once-sacred mountain lying just behind Parihaka, from which he once drew his mana as Prophet of the Mountain, had been subsumed in the name of tourism as a summer attraction. Cowan wrote that there were now 'four alpine houses on its slopes, about half-way to its summit, which is easily reached' (Cowan 1907: 134).

In 1909 Cowan left the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts. It is not known exactly why he did but his wife Eunice died in that year (Colquhoun 1), so perhaps it was time for a change. By then, Cowan had also become a member of the Wellington branches of two 'learned societies' (Grayland 106), the Philosophical Society [who published two of his articles in its annual volume *Transactions and Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute* (Vol. 38: 113, 337)] and the Polynesian Society, into whose journal he contributed pieces from 1905 to 1923.⁷

When Cowan now switched to freelance writing, there was a dramatic change in writing style from the demands of his former government work. For example, in the book he subsequently produced, *The Maoris of New Zealand*, he was much kinder to Te Whiti. The old prophet had died in 1907, and now Cowan wrote that Te Whiti had been misunderstood:

He suffered imprisonment for his people, and he was at one time the most abused and most hated of all men by the Pakeha settlers; but his influence was always for peace, and had it not been for him there would have been war again in 1881, when John Bryce, then Native Minister, marched his troops on Parihaka (Cowan 1910: 355).

Cowan added that there had been a secret cache of guns at Parihaka, part of which Te Whiti revealed to Bryce during the invasion of the village so that Bryce would confiscate them and so ensure peace. For this reason Cowan credited Te Whiti with preventing the igniting of another Taranaki War

⁷ According to my revised chronological bibliography on Cowan.

(1910: 356). However, he was unable to write those kinds of words in *New Zealand, or Ao-Tea-Roa* because the New Zealand Wars were simply too far removed in time and too negative a subject for inclusion in a forward-looking travel guide. As well, Te Whiti's presence and influence in Taranaki was as an embarrassment to the Government because it showed that not all the issues from the New Zealand Wars had been resolved.

The Maoris of New Zealand can be best described as a blend of ethnology and history, or an ethno-history, the composite name reflecting how a study of Maori was beginning to diversify into various specialty areas. *The Maoris of New Zealand* is also a vital book in helping us decide whether Cowan shows evidence of a coherent historiography prior to his writing *The New Zealand Wars*, partly because of its historical content but also because it was crafted under the guidance of an academic historian.

The book's editor was James Hight (1870-1958), who was Professor of History at Canterbury College in Christchurch as well as publishing editor for Whitcombe and Tombs (Phillips 1). Accordingly, Hight would appear to have been the ideal mentor to discipline Cowan to write history for books, which was a far cry from the intense bursts required for writing newspaper copy. *The Maoris of New Zealand* was to be the third volume in a series published by Whitcombe and Tombs called *The Makers of Australasia*, its opening page stating that the previous two volumes in the series had looked at Australian explorers and Sir George Grey. Two more volumes were in preparation, one of them to be written by Hight, however his university commitments were taking an increasing demand on his time (McEldowney in Sturm 642), and the later volumes do not appear to have gone ahead.

Hight has two biographical profiles, one in *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* and a slightly updated version in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, both profiles written by a colleague of Hight's named Neville Phillips, who was also a Professor of History at Canterbury. Phillips wrote in the *Encyclopaedia*:

Grown to manhood in the late Victorian era, Hight was a true Victorian in his capacity for hard work, his zeal for improvement, and his liberal but firm ideals of conduct, which he displayed by example rather than precept. One of the most remarkable of the earlier generations of the native-born, he was a

New Zealander by inclination as by birth, with his roots firmly fixed in Canterbury. Not for him, however, the brasher forms of colonial nationalism. Though he was in advanced middle age before he saw the Old World, his immersion in the Western cultural tradition saved him from any hint of insularity and enabled him to see his country's needs in perspective (Phillips, 1966: 1).

Phillips added in his later *Dictionary* profile that it 'would only be a little fanciful to say that he held the French statesmen Richelieu and Mazarin barely less significant for New Zealand than the Maori seafarers and Edward Gibbon Wakefield' (Phillips 2007: 2). In other words, Hight accepted that a European swamping of a Maori culture was inevitable just as Western civilisations had done elsewhere by physical invasion and/or economic dominance through trade. But for Hight, any such swamping had not totally extinguished the Maori race. In an editor's note in *The Maoris of New Zealand* he wrote:

The British colonisation of New Zealand involved a violent change in the conditions of life in these Islands; but it did not break all connection and interplay between the Maori era and the Pakeha age that was then beginning: the dispossessed people had a distinctive native culture, the product of centuries of evolution, and they were not decimated by the process of settlement and conquest. The life we live today is coloured, it may be faintly in some forms, but still undeniably tinged by the light streaming fitfully out upon us from the past when the Maori possessed the land (Hight in Cowan 1910: vii).

For Hight, that light streaming fitfully out shone the brightest in the 'higher stages of our thought and feeling'. He explained that the Maori had done little to shape the country during the Pakeha agrarian revolution apart from sharing with the colonist their long experience of the country's natural resources. But once Nature had been sufficiently tamed to provide leisure time for more altruistic pursuits, the Maori contribution to the fields of art, poetry, science and philosophy would be more soundly realised and appreciated (Hight in Cowan 1910: vii). For Hight, that time had not quite arrived yet, unless books like *The Maoris of New Zealand* could be seen as paving a way to

see a nation's peoples differently from any dominant Pakeha vision. He subsequently wrote:

The reason, therefore, for including this volume in the Series is not only because New Zealand and the New Zealanders of to-day would have been different from what they are, but also because that it is hoped that a book, such as this is, adding greatly to the authenticated facts relating to Maori culture[,] may help to turn the thoughts of those who wish to know the Story of Man in all his manifestations towards the treasures that may be unlocked at the touch of the investigator of human evolution in the traditions and annals of the Maori-Polynesian (Hight in Cowan 1910: viii).

In other words, if colonists were to acknowledge that the presence of the Maori had helped shape a unique type of New Zealander, the very least that they could do was study the origins of that shaping on the Maori side to help understand *themselves* better as New Zealanders.

The Maoris of New Zealand can be divided into three parts consisting firstly of Maori origins, followed by a section on early interactions with Europeans, and finally one on Maori society under pressure during the New Zealand Wars. The first two sections are largely compilations gleaned from the books of academics⁸, Cowan's peers in the 'learned societies' (Cowan 1910: xi)⁹, and others¹⁰, which were interspersed with Cowan's personal anecdotes or his own research findings. And as a tribute to Eunice, Cowan acknowledged her as the translator of an account of Niue island traditions that covered two pages (43-44).

The third section on the New Zealand Wars is more clearly based on Cowan's personal research, including those all-important reporter's notebooks he had been keeping ever since his years working for the *Auckland Star* between 1887 and 1903, and which included for the first time in book form the oral histories of surviving veterans of the Battle of Orakau. But when he

⁸ Brown, J. Macmillan. *Maori and Polynesian* (1907), p.34; Keane, A. *Man Past and Present* (1886-89), p.31. [Page numbers refer to their reference in *The Maoris of New Zealand*]

⁹ Smith, S. Percy. *Hawaiki: The Original Home of the Maori*, p.41-2.

¹⁰ Grey, G. *Polynesian Mythology* (1906), p.76; Wilson, J. *Sketches of Ancient Maori Life and History* (1894), p.94.

revisited the site to bring his story up to date for *The Maoris of New Zealand*, little physical evidence of this great clash remained. A public road now passed through the site, and Cowan wrote that ‘the traveller may now drive over the spot where scores of slain Maoris were laid in the trenches, their self-dug graves’ (1910: 298).

Hight clearly supported Cowan mentioning the New Zealand Wars because they created a point of difference between New Zealand and Australia. ‘Even if we accept one of the narrowest of definitions of History,’ Hight wrote, ‘we must acknowledge that the presence of the Maori bestows on New Zealand, as contrasted with Australia, great historical interest. The early trading adventures, and the wars ... have given us much picturesque material and a military record, at times creditable to both Pakeha and Maori – which Australia entirely lacks’ (Hight in Cowan 1910: ix). Hight’s argument was later used by Cowan to introduce *The New Zealand Wars* in the opening lines of Volume One.

Cowan’s personal argument for *The Maoris of New Zealand* was that he was recording the end of an era of a generation of mid-nineteenth century Maori that he had got to know intimately. In the book’s opening chapter he stated his argument with a profile of a King Country chief named Hauauru, who was living near Kihikihi when Cowan interviewed him in the 1890s:

Decidedly a more interesting type, that blanketed tattoo-spiralled old warrior, than the present generation of Maori rangatira, who as often as not wears tailor-made clothes of the latest pattern, has a piano and a graphophone¹¹ in his European-built house, is proud of his break of billiards, and whirls to the races in a motor-car (Cowan 1910: 7).

In other words, Cowan clearly saw two generations of Maori existing in the New Zealand of 1910, when the book was released, but his focus for this particular volume was on an earlier one, the generation that had actually experienced the New Zealand Wars.

The end result consisted of an anthology of Cowan’s notes about Maori written from 1887 onwards, which was then attached to a framework of

¹¹ A ‘Graphophone’ was a trade name for an American-made phonograph.

Maori prehistory supplied by other scholars and Cowan's fellow members of the Wellington Philosophical Society and the Polynesian Society.

This is not meant to question Cowan's originality but rather to point out that what made Cowan's work unique was the contributions from his notebooks while working for the *Auckland Star* as a 'special reporter', as mentioned earlier in the literature survey of Alan Mulgan and his observations while working with Cowan.

Let us now look at an extract from *The Maoris of New Zealand*, which represents an excellent example of how Cowan turned his former news stories into chapters. In late September 1894 Cowan covered the funeral of Tawhiao, the second Maori King, held over several days at the foot of Taupiri Mountain. The mountain lies alongside the Waikato River between the settlement of Taupiri and Hamilton, and is used as a tribal cemetery for the Waikato people. The *Auckland Star* carried a full-page spread of the funeral on 4 October 1894, which Cowan would later condense for insertion in *The Maoris of New Zealand*, where he wrote that the event was the most remarkable Maori funeral – or 'tangihanga' – he had ever seen, for '[h]ere were witnessed, probably for the last time on such a scale, some thrilling pictures of old Maoridom' (1910: 348).

One scene in particular during the weeklong event stood out for Cowan – the march of the funeral cortege as the king's body was borne into the Waikato encampment. The account reveals Cowan's ability to interpret that experience for readers of *both* races. He wrote:

The long cortege of Upper Waikato men wound in sight round a turn in the road, with a Maori band at their head playing the 'Dead March' – an innovation borrowed from the military funerals of the Pakeha. Behind the band came the coffin enclosing Tawhiao's body, borne by sixteen half-naked brown figures. Beside his father's remains walked Mahuta [Tawhiao's second son and destined to be the next Maori King]. Then marched the armed men of the King Country, in fighting costume, a splendid savage battalion three to four hundred strong, their only garments a shawl or sheet round their loins, their black hair dressed with feathers, cartridge-belts round their bare shoulders, and ammunition-pouches at their waists. All carried guns, and, as they slowly advanced, they fired their rifles and fowling-pieces loaded with

blank. Eight deep came the wild soldiery, led on by Arakatare Rongowhitiao, a big black-bearded Nagti Raukawa chief, stripped to a waist-sheet, quivering a glistening whalebone mere in his hand. Then came the rest of the singular procession, hundreds of natives with their heads and bodies profusely wreathed and entwined with green leaves and nodding branchlets; it seemed to us almost a 'moving grove', like Birnam Wood which came to doomed Macbeth in Dunsinane (Cowan 1910: 351).

Cowan continues in this vein for several more pages, his writing containing the perfect pacing of an eyewitness account alive with symbolism. For example, the quivering whalebone mere in the hand of Rongowhitiao were hand movements important to Maori which had to be included even if they could not be explained without delving into an extended explanation of Maori ethnography. Cowan also compares the march-past to a scene in a Shakespearian tragedy, the procession of natives 'wreathed and entwined with green leaves and nodding branchlets', creating the impression of a moving grove of small trees, 'like Birnam Wood which came to doomed Macbeth in Dunsinane' (1910: 351), as if to give Europeans something comparable that they could relate to in their own imported English lore.

A few days later, the cortege started up again once all the farewell speeches had been made, slowly winding up Taupiri Mountain to Tawhiao's gravesite amid a massed wailing, the stamping of feet, the firing of guns and the letting off of explosives, the military imagery suggesting that the funeral was a final symbolic call to arms for Maori. For it is *most significant* that Cowan ended *The Maoris of New Zealand* with his account of Tawhiao's funeral, the positioning marking a fitting finale for his argument that he was recording the end of an era of a generation of mid-nineteenth century Maori he had got to know intimately. 'The tangihanga carried to some of us more than a lamentation over the dead chief,' he wrote, 'it was the crying for the final passing away of the restless ancient order, for with the tattooed grim old King there died too the futile forty-year-old dream of an independent Maori kingdom' (Cowan 1910: 348).

In summary, then, *The Maoris of New Zealand* incorporates material from all periods of Cowan's working life between 1887 and 1910. It is the story of young white man trying to make sense of Maoridom by learning about it di-

rectly from his local informants. After 1903, he would mix with like-minded souls at the meetings of the Philosophical Society and the Polynesian Society in Wellington, who would help put a more scholarly edge to his work. The first half of *The Maoris of New Zealand* reflects the input of Cowan's peers at those societies. The remainder is clearly based on Cowan's personal research during the *Auckland Star* years, which included oral histories of surviving New Zealand Wars veterans. At times, Cowan's writing still seems raw and unsophisticated, but nevertheless offers fascinating insights into that veiled world of Maoridom. What is more, it targets a general audience during a period when most ethnographical studies of Maori were channelled into papers to be read only in front of the learned societies. The book may be an ethno-history rather than history, but it marks a transition away from journalism for Cowan, thanks largely (one suspects) to the input of the academic historian James Hight.

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II. *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* (1911)

This account uses the 1975 Capper Press facsimile reprint.

The Adventures of Kimble Bent was published in 1911, closely in the wake of *The Maoris of New Zealand* (1910). But instead of taking a general look at Maoridom as in the first book, Cowan narrows his focus to Taranaki and the fate of one man, an army deserter named Kimble Bent (also known as Kimball Bent) during the Taranaki War of 1868-69. The key issue surrounding *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* is whether it is too imaginative to be considered an historical document, for the book's content is reminiscent of a populist colonial adventure novel. But Cowan was quite explicit about the authenticity of his work and took a stand in the opening lines of the book's preface:

This book is not a work of fiction. It is a plain narrative of real life in the New Zealand bush, a true story of adventure in a day not yet remote, when adventure in abundance was still to be had in the land of the Maori. Every name used is a real one, every character who appears in these pages had existence in those war days of forty years ago. Every incident described here is a faithful record of actual happenings; some of them may convince the reader that truth is stranger than fiction (Cowan 1975: vii).

Later historians have tended to take this statement of Cowan's on trust, which has enabled them to use Cowan's book to set the scene for a larger sense of the war in Taranaki. For Cowan also included part of Bent's story in *The New Zealand Wars* in chapters about a war he named after the leading Maori commander, Riwia Titokowaru (?-1888), hence the name Titokowaru's War (*NZ Wars I*, xvii; *II*, 183-4). Sixty years on, James Belich would also use the title Titokowaru's War in his history of Titokowaru called *I Shall Not Die* (1989). Yet another historian, W. H. Oliver, would write a profile of Bent for *the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, drawing upon *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* plus newspaper articles written between 1873 and 1880 (Oliver 3).

Cowan first met Bent in 1903, when he was invited to Wellington by the head of the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts, Thomas Donne, to

have a portrait photograph taken and be interviewed (Oliver 3, Cowan 1975: ix). At the time Cowan was working for the department as a publicist, as mentioned in the Part One of this chapter. The resultant photograph of Bent depicts a tall and lean man with a long flowing beard who Cowan later described as a ‘grey old man, of mild and quiet eye, who might easily be taken for some highly respectable shopkeeper who had spent all his life in city bounds’ (1975: 331-2). For the rest of the decade they kept in touch via letters and meetings, and Cowan observed that although Bent could speak English, he largely thought in Maori:

When he writes to me, he usually writes in Maori, and he is practically a Maori himself, for he has lived the greater part of his life as a Maori, and he has assimilated the peculiar modes of thought and some of the ancient beliefs of the natives, as well as their tongue and customs (Cowan 1975: viii–ix).

Cowan first published an early version of Bent’s story in *The New Zealand Times* newspaper during the spring of 1906, which came out as a ten-part serial called ‘The White Slave, Prisoner Amongst Cannibals’,¹² However, Cowan continued his interviews with Bent until the end of the decade (Cowan 1975: ix), so any material gathered after 1906 has to be seen as new content for a book version of Bent’s story, printed and bound in London, though published by local New Zealand publishers Whitcombe and Tombs.

According to Cowan’s a one-page profile of Bent in *The New Zealand Wars*, Kimble Bent (1837-1916) was born in Eastport, Maine in the United States. During his youth he spent three years aboard a United States training ship before making his way to England and joining the Fifty-Seventh Regiment. However, Bent apparently never adjusted to British army life; while stationed in Taranaki in 1864 he was court-marshalled for insubordination and flogged, and a year later he deserted. Fortunately, the chief of the first sub-tribe that Bent encountered adopted him as his protégé, a sort of chiefly protection against being killed. To make himself more valued, Bent became a gun armourer and cartridge maker (*NZ Wars II*, 184). Cowan added:

¹² According to Turnbull Library records and a blurb on the flyleaf of the book’s 1975 Capper Press reprint.

At Taiporohenui, Keteonetea, Otapawa, and other stockaded villages of the Ngati Ruanui Bent lived with his rangatira, taking his share in all the work of the community; he had imagined for himself a life of leisure among natives, but he soon found that he was little better than a slave. Among a less intelligent and forceful people than the Maoris perhaps he would have realized his ambition of an easy life and a position of authority; as it was he found his level, as a servant (*NZ Wars II*, 184).

Cowan considered Bent's story to be 'the most remarkable one amongst those of the many renegade Pakehas who took up a life with the natives in the war days' (*NZ Wars II*, 184). Its unique appeal is as an oral history from a European living in a Maori wartime environment, behind 'enemy' lines during Titokowaru's major battles. If anybody could present a Europeanised view of life on the Maori side during this campaign, Bent could. However, while cosseted away in the forest with his Maori masters, Bent was obviously not aware of the wider events of the war, except through hearsay, especially about happenings on the European side. To cover those events, Cowan eventually had to resort to an omniscient viewpoint, which fortunately provided an opportunity to include other eyewitness accounts as corroborating evidence for Bent's viewpoint. Cowan subsequently wrote:

In confirmation and extension of Bent's story, I have gathered data at first-hand both from Taranaki Maoris who fought under Titokowaru, and from soldiers and settlers who fought against him, and these particulars are incorporated with the old Pakeha-Maori's narrative. The 1868-69 portion of the book is, therefore, practically a history of the Titokowaru war in Taranaki; and it embraces a great deal of matter not hitherto recorded (Cowan 1975: ix-x).

Some of that corroborating evidence might have been gleaned when Cowan visited Parihaka while touring Taranaki on horseback in 1904. Bent told Cowan that he had spent a week at Parihaka healing the sick amongst Te Whiti's followers using traditional Maori methods (Cowan 1975: 331). Cowan also recorded a substantial oral history from a war veteran named Tutanga Waionui, who had lived in the same camp as Bent as a boy warrior

during Titokowaru's War (Cowan 1975: 149). The corroborating evidence was necessary because Bent proved an unreliable witness at times; he told Cowan that he had part-Indian blood of the Musqua tribe (*NZ Wars II*, 184) but W. H. Oliver noted in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* that 'in the records' both Bent's parents appeared as 'white' (Oliver 1). Oliver wrote:

There is little evidence of the events of his life except from his much later testimony. Bent was undoubtedly a liar: in his youth to save his own skin; in later life to retrieve his reputation. But many of his stories are not improbable, and much of the information he gives is not relevant to his quest for self-justification. Further, his biographer, James Cowan, checked his tale with survivors from both sides of the conflict (Oliver 1).

Oliver added that Bent might have coloured his American origins, 'perhaps to make his desertion from the British army appear less objectionable' (Oliver 1). But if Bent was being evasive with what he told Cowan, it would have rebounded more on Bent than Cowan. It was Bent who needed to clear his name, to prove that he had not shot at any soldiers while living on the Maori side as a deserter. Any attempt on his part to fudge information by toying with Cowan would ultimately undermine Bent's credibility as a reliable witness, which was the last thing he needed.

As well as being an oral history, *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* represents an interesting light on the period when members of a once-peaceful religious movement called Pai Marie (also known as the Hauhau) protested at the gradual government confiscation of Maori land in South Taranaki, which eventually escalated into violence (Belich in McGibbon 2000: 381). Cowan had little sympathy for fanatical Hauhau resistance; he frequently refers to the Hauhau in a fired-up state as 'savages', by contrast with Maori who were not part of the sect. Cowan's 'savages' might have returned to a primitive state, but it was a condition that was forced upon them by the same European expansion that was also meant to 'civilize' them, i.e., make them appear more European. Cowan knew that the Hauhau followers were resorting to desperate measures to recover land they believed Europeans were stealing from them. So when Bent told him of witnessing his first tangi for the dead in an isolated clearing following a rout of the Hauhau by his old regiment, Cowan

wrote it up with compassion, to show that even the worst type of so-called ‘savage’ was merely a constructed opinion by the opposing side, that they were still people with real feelings. He wrote:

The people gathered in the middle of the little clearing and for hours the sound of lamentation rang through the forest, often rising into a wild, heart-breaking shriek as some blanket-draped or mat-kilted woman, her long hair unbound, and her cheeks streaming with tears, cried her keening song for her slain. The chiefs taki’d up and down, weapon in hand, and told of the deeds of those who had fallen; each ended his mournful speech with a chanted dirge. When the song was a well-known one, the whole tribe would join in and sing the lament with an intensity of feeling that made their very bodies quiver. It was the full and unrestrained outpouring of the savage (Cowan 1975: 65).

Titokowaru’s followers had also revived cannibalism as part of their war rituals, according to Bent (Cowan 1975: ix), which was proving a propaganda coup for Titokowaru. Settlers fled their farms perceiving the threat to be greater than it actually was, according to Major-General George Whitmore (1829-1903), who led the Taranaki campaign against Titokowaru from 1868 (Green in McGibbon 2000: 610). ‘The most senseless panic appeared to seize all classes, and seemed to grow in intensity in proportion to the distance from the only seat of danger,’ Whitmore wrote in his memoir *The Last Maori War Under the Self-Reliant Policy* (1902). He added that at the front, the Taranaki settlers ‘braced themselves once more to face the worst, but along the coast the alarm grew mile by mile, till in Wellington itself there were some who expected from day to day to see the advance of Titokowaru’s band, then only seventy in number, taking possession of the suburbs of the city’ (Whitmore 1902: xxx).

Whitmore also became acutely aware of the toll the campaign was taking when the tide turned against Titokowaru. He saw Titokowaru’s people ‘reduced to great straits, living on the maggots [possibly huhu grubs] of the matai trees and such vegetable products of the forest as are scarcely edible except when pressed to hunger – these and many other details of that painful

retreat were narrated by the women, who appeared worn out with fatigue themselves' (Whitmore 1902: 131).

Because Whitmore's memoir came out in 1902 it would have provided Cowan with an important second viewpoint and given him some confidence in presenting Bent's account in graphic form. He was well aware of the degree of violence he was presenting, for, towards the end of the book he wrote that the 'idea of a New Zealand government force decapitating its enemies and smoke-drying its heads for purposes of reward is too, too savage for the refined humanitarian to contemplate without a shudder' (1975: 290). This was a reference to the closing segment of the campaign when Whitmore's forces engaged in a long pursuit of Titokowaru's rapidly diminishing followers across much of South Taranaki. It was during this pursuit that beheadings of captured warriors took place for monetary reward.

However, Cowan added that while it was barbarous, 'it was thoroughly in accord with the spirit of guerrilla warfare that was forced upon the troops, and it served its purpose, for it struck terror into the hearts of Titokowaru's warriors, and they never fought again' (1975: 290).

The book also showcases Cowan's advanced knowledge of forest lore, which adds another layer of credibility to his account because it is a side of him that is seldom mentioned. Cowan knew the terrain that Bent had crossed. He was familiar with the coastal lowlands of Taranaki from his horseback tours, and during an expedition in 1892 he crossed much of the same ground that Bent had traversed 25 years earlier during the closing stages of Titokowaru's War. After a few days of following a horse track, the expedition had looked down upon a seemingly interminable forest that stretched almost to the base of Mount Egmont/Taranaki: 'No grass field, no fence, no house or even tent, no smoke of settlers' burning-off fire, gave civilised touch to that silent expanse,' Cowan wrote in a later memoir. 'Valley and hill and glinting stream and dark solemn forest lay bathed in soft blue haze, mysterious, un-peopled; as untouched by man, it seemed to us gazing there, as it might have been a thousand years ago' (1940: 81).

Later criticism by New Zealand novelist Maurice Shadbolt has severely undermined the integrity of Cowan's work. In 1990 Shadbolt published an historical novel called *Monday's Warriors*, which was a rewriting and reinterpretation of *The Adventures of Kimble Bent*. The book was released as a part of a fictional trilogy of the New Zealand Wars, the other two books

a fictional trilogy of the New Zealand Wars, the other two books looking at Te Kooti and at the War in the North. Shadbolt's comments are important because of his great popularity at the time. At the end of his book Shadbolt wrote a chapter called 'In Fact', in which he mentioned Cowan's approach to writing Bent's story:

Early in the twentieth century a journalist and apprentice historian named James Cowan, looking for frontier tales, knocked on Bent's door. The old man did better than grant an interview. He allowed Cowan to make free with diary notes on his early life. The result was a series of highly coloured articles and in 1911 a book called *The Adventures of Kimble Bent*. Failing even to check the spelling of his subject's name, Cowan was bound to get much else wrong. He duly did. Much might be credited to Bent's leg-pulling. Much was surely due to Cowan's failure to audit Bent's story. Anyway he credited Bent with a youthful existence in the US Navy and even half-membership of a mysterious Indian tribe called the Musqua in northern Maine: there is no such tribe. Still anxious for a clean slate, and a formal pardon, Bent denied firing at fellow whites in the New Zealand Wars, and particularly not at his regimental commander (Colonel Hassard). He admitted to only manufacturing shot. The story would not have survived long under cross-examination in a witness box. Cowan, however was no lawyer and Bent no sworn witness. Otherwise much of Cowan's book is rather overwrought fancy in *Boy's Own* prose. Cowan, who would write better, could not have been especially proud of the book, and was perhaps even ashamed; he omitted to send Bent a copy (Shadbolt 1990: 307).

Shadbolt's claims seem to be a deliberate attempt to undermine Cowan's book. However, if we go through the points that Shadbolt has made, they soon dissolve in their impact.

Firstly, regarding the spelling of Bent's first name, Shadbolt spelled it as 'Kimball' and Cowan as 'Kimble', Shadbolt implying that Cowan's research was so sloppy that he even spelt Bent's name wrong. Early references to Bent can be found in two books written in the nineteenth century about the New Zealand Wars by Walter Gudgeon. He mentions a 'Kimball Bent' in *Reminiscences of the War in New Zealand* (1879: 190) and *The Defenders of New Zealand*

(1887: 529-30). Shadbolt might have taken Bent's name from Gudgeon's books as the earliest published sources, or perhaps his army records. However, the mystery deepens when we discover that Gudgeon had helped Cowan with some of the content for *The Adventures of Kimble Bent*. Indeed, Cowan thanks Gudgeon for his information and assistance in the book's preface (1975: x). Surely Gudgeon would have mentioned the alternate spellings of Bent's name when the two writers were working together if it was deemed important? So rather than failing to check the spelling of Bent's first name, as Shadbolt claims, Cowan has at some stage made a conscious decision to spell Bent's first name as 'Kimble', even after working with Gudgeon.

Later historians accept either way of spelling of Bent's name but both Belich and Oliver use 'Kimble' in the body of their texts when writing about Bent (Belich 1993, Oliver 2007).

Secondly, Shadbolt has implied that Bent might still have been found guilty in a courtroom of shooting his onetime commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Jason Hassard, during a battle in Taranaki. Here, Shadbolt has ignored Cowan's reference to that incident in *The New Zealand Wars*, where he wrote:

It was camp gossip after the battle that Kimble Bent, the deserter from the 57th, was one of the defenders of the pa, and that it was his bullet that had laid out his old officer, Hassard, low. This was incorrect. Bent, however, had assisted, on compulsion, in the building of the fort, and was in the place until two days before the assault, when he was sent away with non-combatants to a place of security higher up the Tangahoe (*NZ Wars II*, 65-66).

What Shadbolt has also overlooked is that it would have been ridiculous for a Maori war commander to thrust a cartridge maker, as Bent was, into the front lines. Without Bent there would have been no ammunition made during a time when procuring conventional supplies of arms from outside sources was extremely difficult. Belich also mentions in *I Shall Not Die* that a South Taranaki Maori chief named Ngawaka Taurua had said that Bent did not shoot Hassard (1993: 37-8).

Thirdly, Bent told Cowan that there was a Musqua Indian village on the banks of the St Croix River, near his hometown of Eastport in Maine (Cowan

1975: 7). Despite Shadbolt's claim that no such tribe existed, it *was* possible that a remnant of the Musqua Indian tribe/clan resided in northern Maine. An online search using the word 'Musqua Indian' reveals a handful of Indians using Musqua as a surname, based mainly in Saskatchewan, Canada. Saskatchewan lies next to the Great Lakes, which empty into the Atlantic via connecting rivers that happen to pass the State of Maine. It is therefore possible that a party of Musqua could have migrated to the St Croix using a conventional route, the existing river systems.

Finally, Shadbolt wrote that Bent 'claimed half-membership' with the Musqua, implying that he was half Indian. In fact Bent told Cowan that his mother Eliza – not himself – was a half-caste Indian (Cowan 1975: 7), which would make Bent at most quarter-caste. Unfortunately there is no mention of Eliza in online databases to support Bent's claim. However, Bent's father, Waterman Bent, *is* mentioned; he died in 1855 and his body resides in Eastport cemetery.¹³

In summary then, what started out as a newspaper serial called 'The White Slave' was enlarged over the following decade into a book version called *The Adventures of Kimble Bent*. By then, Cowan had been mentored by the academic historian James Hight to help publish *The Maoris of New Zealand*, and had had six other books published – all of them non-fiction. *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* would later be refined over the next decade to become part of Cowan's larger history, *The New Zealand Wars*. Accordingly, to consider *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* as fictional casts an uneasy pall over the larger project.

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¹³ www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nbcampob/eport.htm

4

The New Zealand Wars (1922-23)

This account uses the 1983 reprint of the *New Zealand Wars*.

I. Structure

Let us now look at the two volumes of *The New Zealand Wars*, the background to their making, how they were structured, and who influenced Cowan. I also suggest that the value of the volumes goes far beyond their being just an historical record. How Cowan wrote up that history by drawing particularly upon the writing style of the nineteenth century American historian Francis Parkman, and of Robert Louis Stevenson, gave an international flavour to the work. We will also look at one of the most important parts of the volumes in terms of Cowan's personal contribution – his oral histories. For *The New Zealand Wars* was a huge collective effort from its inception until its release. Later parts in this chapter look at Cowan's influences, followed by an overall assessment.

As a brief background to the planning for *The New Zealand Wars*, in 1918 a New Zealand wartime Coalition Government held together by William Massey was deciding who should write what was described in Cabinet papers for that year as an 'Official History of the Wars in New Zealand' (McGibbon 2005: 5). Such a grand title implied that the New Zealand Wars project had assumed a status similar to the official histories being planned at the time on New Zealand's involvement in the First World War. As one of several contenders to write the history, Cowan seemed well suited to the task. His fluency in Maori meant that he could converse in the languages of both sides and he already had an archive of oral testimonies from veterans of the wars. Indeed, that last aspect would prove beneficial, for according to the New Zealand war historian Ian McGibbon, a major reason for Cabinet approving the project was because of a concern 'that many veterans of the wars, both European and Maori, were passing away with their experiences unrecorded' (McGibbon 2005: 5). Cowan would later make a point of mentioning the

date when any person had died since interviewing them to show how constantly dwindling his sources were for oral histories.

One the most influential supporters of Cowan's suitability for the project was his former employer, the *Auckland Star* editor Thomson Leys, according to Alan Mulgan, who had worked with both Cowan and Leys during his own *Auckland Star* years and ended up as editorial assistant to Leys. Writing in his book *Great Days in New Zealand Writing* (1962), Mulgan mentioned a conversation with Eileen Stowell, Cowan's second wife [they married in 1913], who told him that there had been a good deal of private lobbying for different candidates. Mulgan believed that the most powerful influence on Cowan's side had been Leys, his belief partly based on what Leys had told him personally. 'If anyone else had been chosen, it would have been a tragic error,' Mulgan wrote. 'Dr Leys knew well what James Cowan had done and could do. Cowan had begun his newspaper career on the *Star* and had become noted for special articles on Maori and sea subjects' (1962: 76-77).

As editor of a major newspaper, Leys had considerable influence in government circles, but despite being approached several times as a possible parliamentary candidate, he preferred to wield his influence through journalism (Mogford 1). Indeed, Cowan might have had a promising career as a writer based in Auckland if he had chosen to remain at the *Star* instead of moving to Wellington. Leys and his business partner Henry Brett operated the publishing company Brett Publishing, which, as well as publishing the *Star*, had published *The Defenders of New Zealand* (1887) by Walter Gudgeon and *The Early History of New Zealand* (1890) by R. A. Sherrin and J. H. Wallace. Brett Publishing also published Cowan's first book, *Sketches of Old New Zealand* (1901), consisting of biographies to go with portraits of Maori subjects painted by the Austrian artist Gottfried Lindauer.

The Department of Internal Affairs eventually hired Cowan as an historian initially for two years and then extended it for another two (McGibbon 2005: 5), the extended time frame perhaps better reflecting the daunting schedule Cowan had set himself to revisit the 200-odd former battle sites. Some of the sites bore scant evidence of a battle by then, so reconstructing any skirmish would have proved extremely difficult if some of the actual survivors from the battle had not accompanied Cowan to point out what happened. So a person who could establish a rapport with Maori veterans was

vital if the project was to realise Cabinet's vision of an official history acceptable to *both* sides.

By the time the first volume of *The New Zealand Wars* came out in 1922, the project had been reduced from what Cowan had originally conceived as four volumes, to two (McGibbon 2005: 5). Just what part of the project had been cut back to fit into two volumes is not known. However, some residual material about the Waipa valley from the chapters on the Waikato campaign may have ended up in Cowan's *The Old Frontier*, which was also published in 1922 by a Te Awamutu-based newspaper.

In the preface to *The New Zealand Wars* Cowan wrote that there was now plenty of printed material on the subject, both private and official, plus eyewitness accounts, the latter accounts helping him to understand what he termed 'the psychology of the struggle' (*NZ Wars I*, xiii-xiv). His preface, which spans three pages, firstly mentions the key contributors, most of them former veterans of the wars, including Thomas Porter, Gilbert Mair, William Wallace, W. B. Messenger and G. A. Preece. These contributors (or their late family in the case of Colonel Messenger) might have seen value in giving Cowan access to their books, diaries and papers if it meant that they could be part of an official history of the wars with its potential for a greater audience reach than their individual publishing efforts. If so, it was a shrewd decision, considering that *The New Zealand Wars* went into two reprints.

Cowan drew heavily upon the writings of some the key contributors, especially Gilbert Mair (1843-1923) because he was present at so many of the major campaigns, including Orakau, Gate Pa and the Urewera hunt for Te Kooti. In the process, Cowan might have saved Mair from obscurity because most of his accumulated writings were lost: In 1923, Brett Publishing published a small book written by Mair called *Reminiscences and Maori Stories*. In the book's preface, Mair's publisher Henry Brett wrote that 'Captain Mair suffered an irreparable loss by the destruction of his great collection of manuscript matter in a fire in Wellington' (Mair 1923: vi). Brett added:

In this disaster he lost the substance of long researches in Maori history and folklore. Had these notes been available, he would have embodied them in a book. Or several books, long ere this, but it was impossible to gather the data again. What remained was but a fragment of the vast store of knowledge he

acquired from the chiefs and tohungas of the vanished generation (Mair 1923: vi).

Cowan and Mair worked closely on *The New Zealand Wars* and even toured together some of the former battle sites around Rotorua and in the remote Urewera ranges. Cowan later accorded Mair a 'hero' status in the volumes, but he appears to have earned the tag. In 1886 he received the New Zealand Cross for preventing the residents of a Rotorua village from being massacred by a force of Te Kooti's followers (Savage 2).

In a later acknowledgement Cowan also thanks Alexander Turnbull for access to the resources of the Turnbull Library in Wellington (*NZ Wars I*, xv). Turnbull's gesture was timely, as Cowan spent the preliminary phase of the project researching and compiling a historical base on which to attach his oral and documentary histories. This preliminary research period becomes apparent once we look at the dates of Cowan's oral histories listed in Appendix D, which he did not begin collecting in earnest until the second year of the project in 1919. Cowan dated every oral history he collected either in the text or as a footnote, so we know exactly when he started visiting the former battle sites with his veteran eyewitnesses. For the War in the North he began in 1919, when he visited the battle pa of Puketutu with the Ngapuhi war veteran Rawiri te Ruru, and Ohacawai pa with Hohaia Tongo as his guide (*NZ Wars I*, 48n, 71, 71n, 72n). Cowan next visited Taranaki battle sites in 1919 and 1920, and Waikato and East Coast sites in 1920 and 1921.

Cowan wrote about the events of the New Zealand Wars in strict chronological order. For each major war he first provided an overview, followed by separate chapters on each battle.¹⁴ Indeed, one could have an acceptable general overview of the course of the campaigns by merely reading each war's introductory chapter. However, much of the book's inherent humanity would be lost with this approach, because most of the tragedies he records are located in the more personalised battle scenes. As a result, the story of the New Zealand Wars is told as one continuous narrative, each chapter limited to about ten pages, which served two practical purposes: firstly, they were so detailed that their brevity prevented overloading the reader. Secondly, they

¹⁴ Cowan also provided 13 major subheadings, but they must have been considered superfluous, as they ended up at the end of the preface instead of in the Table Of Contents.

were mostly self-contained stories, which meant that Cowan could insert later material – as with his oral and documentary histories – and needed only to add a chapter here or there safe in the knowledge that it would not interfere with the overall flow of the narrative.

The first volume dealt with events during 1845-64, which included the major wars in the North, Taranaki and Waikato. It also mentioned the events on the Wairau Plain at the top of the South Island between 1843-5 (*NZ Wars I*, 92-5), before focusing entirely on the North Island. The second volume, a year later, told of events during 1864-72, which Cowan termed the ‘Hauhau Wars’, based largely around the attempted amalgamation of different Maori religions as a base for rebellion. Cowan wrote that this new phase of warfare sprung up in Taranaki within a week of the fall of Orakau, and that it was ‘accompanied by a fanatic ferocity unknown in the previous campaigns’. He described the new phase as a ‘hardening-up of the Maori fighting-spirit in a kind of holy war’, and that there were many critical occasions when the colonial forces would have had to beg for Imperial assistance again if it had not been for the help of the Maori tribes loyal to the Government, the kupapa, to turn the tide of war in their favour (*NZ Wars II*, 1).

Cowan’s story of the battle for the control of New Zealand now spanned three decades, Cowan claiming that it had not been previously possible ‘to gather in any of the other works on the subject a connected account of the successive outbreaks and campaigns’ (*NZ Wars I*, viii). His detailing such a prolonged conflict dashed any notions of a young British colony expanding harmoniously amongst its indigenous inhabitants, especially with his final chapter, which told of ongoing troubles extending into the closing years of the nineteenth century, some twenty years after peace had been officially declared.

Just when a cut-off date should be placed for the end of the New Zealand Wars is debatable. Damon Salesa suggests in the *New Oxford History of New Zealand* that 1930 might be a suitable cut-off date, which was when New Zealand forces in Samoa began to demobilise after subjugating the Mau independence movement (Salesa in Byrnes 2009: 156). This thesis suggests *The Maoris in the Great War* (1926) as the endpoint to Cowan’s New Zealand Wars historiography, but his later books show that he had sufficient material and angles to carry on the momentum of the New Zealand Wars as a topic to

the end of his writing career [three of the more significant ones are reviewed in Appendix F].

Cowan's 'documentary histories' were obtained from letters sent by war veterans and early settlers scattered around the country to help clarify various aspects of the wars. Appendix D shows that Cowan was receiving a constant stream of letters from these sources, including personal diaries or journals supplied by a deceased veteran's family. When using documentary histories Cowan quotes from them verbatim, but he varied his approach with his oral histories. Sometimes he leaves the actual dialogue intact, delineating the text as an oral history by surrounding the statement with quotation marks. At other times he merely paraphrases it. But he *always* makes a point in emphasising when he is recording an oral history while visiting an actual battle site. For not only did they represent part of his original input into the text, they also set historical precedents in their own right by providing alternative viewpoints (especially from the Maori side) to the official military dispatches that were sent to the Government by ranking soldiers to describe a particular engagement. These dispatches were invariably one-sided and essentially described the battle from the viewpoint of the commanders.

For David Simmons, an ethnologist from Auckland Museum and Institute, it was the first-hand accounts from combatants on both sides that made *The New Zealand Wars* 'especially valuable'. Writing in an introduction to *Tales of the Maori* (1972) [an anthology of Cowan's short stories published posthumously by Reed], Simmons added:

It [*The New Zealand Wars*] suffers perhaps in being insufficiently referenced but makes up for that by the human quality it portrays. It is this quality which is the special attribute of James Cowan's writing. The stories are occasionally patronising, but always they are stories of people (Simmons in Cowan 1982: 1).

In a handful of lines Simmons has captured the key strengths and weaknesses of *The New Zealand Wars*. Later interpretations mostly looked at the wars from the viewpoint of the powerful decision makers in New Zealand politics (Sinclair 1957, Wards 1968, Belich 1986). In comparison, Cowan sought out mostly the viewpoint of individual participants, because *that was his brief*. As

stated earlier, Cabinet approval of the project was bound up in a concern to record the experiences of veterans before too many more passed away. Wider interpretations of that material could come later.

However, the comment by Simmons that Cowan perhaps insufficiently referenced *The New Zealand Wars* needs clarification. The material can certainly be found wanting at times for more precise in-text referencing – at least by modern standards – but let us give him credit for what he *did* supply. Cowan supplied an index and his appendices spilled over 50 pages. He also noted any book sources in the text (see Appendix E), but not specific page numbers. His in-text references to his documentary and oral history sources take up seven A4 pages (Appendix D). The impact of his copious maps and photographs will be discussed later in this chapter, but he also included endnotes with many chapters, some of which even ran contrary to what he had written. For example, at the end of Chapter 30 Cowan accorded a settler named John Watson of Auckland an endnote that covered two pages (*NZ Wars I*, 286-8). Cowan had written of an attack by a Maori war party on Burt's farmhouse in Paerata, south of Auckland (*NZ Wars I*, 283-6). Watson queried some of Cowan's information but rather than altering his earlier copy, Cowan inserted Watson's alternative viewpoint as an endnote. This was possibly due to the very late arrival of Watson's reply in May 1922, which was only a month before Cowan would sign off Volume One for type-setting (*NZ Wars I*, xvii). However, his action signals that Cowan was prepared to accept, indeed publish, alternative viewpoints to his own.

II. Influences

In this segment we explore the influence of the nineteenth century American historian Francis Parkman on Cowan's writing of *The New Zealand Wars*. There were other writers who inspired Cowan, such as Robert Louis Stevenson, whose influence is discussed at the end of this segment, but Parkman was by far the most influential. This does not mean that such an influence swayed Cowan from the brief specified by Cabinet to record the experiences of veterans of the wars. Rather, it has more to do with his stylistic treatment of the history of the wars.

Cowan's recognition of Parkman's influence is outlined as early as in the opening chapter, where he asks the reader to look to the works of Parkman for historic parallels between New Zealand and other nations, rather than to nineteenth-century British historians (*NZ Wars I*, 1).¹⁵ However, Cowan's linking of New Zealand's pioneering past with aspects of North America's was never meant to be some all-encompassing theory of New Zealand settler society. Rather, it was because the histories of the conquest of North America by the French and British had similarities to what was happening in New Zealand before and during the time of the New Zealand Wars.

From the outset, Cowan wanted to clearly demonstrate an affinity with Parkman by recommending on the opening pages three of Parkman's books: *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851), *Pioneers of France in the New World* (1865) and *Montcalm and Wolfe* (1884). By reading those books, he added,

the family likeness of the adventures of the [American] pathfinder and the forest fighter to the New Zealand life of the "sixties" is irresistibly forced upon the mind. There was the same dual combat with wild nature and with untamed man, there was the necessity in each land for soldierly skill; the same display of all grades of human courage; much of the same tale of raid and foray, siege, trail-hunting, and ambuscade (*NZ Wars I*, 1).

¹⁵ Although Cowan also mentions the Americans Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, their presence in *The New Zealand Wars* appears minor in comparison with Parkman. However, their influence is more obvious in *Hero Stories of New Zealand* (1935), which is reviewed in Appendix F.

The quote mentions soldiering and scouting in North America, but the pioneers were another important element in Cowan's history, as can be seen in the extended title of *The New Zealand Wars*, which is called 'A History of the Maori Campaigns and the Pioneering Period'. For Cowan, many of the life-threatening situations faced by settlers along the military borders in Taranaki, Waikato and the East Coast were the same as those once confronted by their North American counterparts, 'the New England back-woodsman and the far-out plainsman' (*NZ Wars I*, 1).

Clues to when Cowan first began to develop notions of a North American 'presence' in New Zealand can be found as far back as his childhood days at Orakau. It was there that a political border just a short distance from his family farm separating two races seemed to have created a set of impressions that were far detached from the children's stories he read in imported English schoolbooks. According to Rollo Arnold in his social history of mid-nineteenth century New Zealand *The Farthest Promised Land* (1981), the 1870s in New Zealand – when Cowan was a schoolboy – was marked by a rapid expansion of popular education. This led to almost universal literacy amongst schoolchildren, and the books they read were the same as their English counterparts (1981: 355).

But whatever literary world existed within the confines of Cowan's schoolhouse at Te Awamutu, it bore little resemblance to the realities outside the schoolhouse windows. Te Awamutu had an Imperial army camp of 4,000 at the end of the Waikato Wars, according to Cowan in *The Old Frontier* (1922: 79). When the camp broke up, their fortifications remained, including a redoubt at Alexandra (where Tawhiao surrendered, as mentioned in Chapter One), which is preserved today as an historic site. But more prevalent were the timber blockhouses that acted like sentinels along the frontier line. 'Formidable on the youthful eye on those lively years of the [1870s] loomed the blockhouse,' Cowan wrote in *The Old Frontier*. 'This was the picturesque little garrison-house which crowned the Karaponia hill at Orakau, as if guarding our homestead that stood a few hundred yards away among the groves.' He added that blockhouse was a type of border outpost that by the later part of the New Zealand Wars could be found as far inland as the road linking Taupo with Hawkes Bay on the East Coast (1922: 89). Incredibly, one of these watchtowers still remains, preserved as an historic site at Manaia, Taranaki,

the same one depicted on a page in *The New Zealand Wars* (II, 483), though the land surrounding it is now a golf course.

At first appearances, Cowan's settlers in *The New Zealand Wars* seem like pawns, providing an excuse for economic expansionism by their mere presence. For example, when putting the case for the Taranaki settlers, Cowan wrote:

With thousands upon thousands of acres of beautiful and fertile but unused territory around them, it was very natural that they should urge the Administration to purchase new blocks for farms. ... The vigorous men of Cornwall and Devon, who formed the larger proportion of the settlement-founders, were not disposed to permit a few hundreds of natives to bar the way to the good acres lying waste under fern and tutu (*NZ Wars I*, 157).

But the important point to be taken from this quote is that Cowan was presenting *a case* for the European settlers; he was not taking sides but trying to write from their viewpoint. His technique of temporarily siding with one side or the other worked most of the time throughout the narrative, but because his research material was overwhelmingly European in origin, it was always going to be difficult to create any *real* balance.

In the preface to *The New Zealand Wars* Cowan laid out a research plan that bore elements of the one adopted by Parkman over sixty years earlier in 1851 for his book *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*. Parkman wrote that he had visited the sites of all the principle events recorded in his narrative, 'and gathered such local traditions as seemed worthy of confidence' (1908: xxxii). Similarly, Cowan wrote in his research plan that his field notes were 'enhanced by the presence of soldiers, settlers or natives who had fought there and who were able to describe the actions on the spot' (*NZ Wars I*, xiv).

Cowan might have found common ground in Parkman's research methodology, but in other respects the writers were completely different. Francis Parkman (1823-93) was college-trained and a member of New England's intellectual elite. He started out on a literary journey very early in life; he was only eighteen when he worked out a lifelong plan of historical research (Hawgood 1-2). That research culminated in a nine-volume history called

France and England in North America, which included *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* and took almost three decades to complete (Gale in Serafin, 869-71). Coincidentally, Parkman's vision of a life's work at only eighteen bears some similarities to Cowan's revelation in *Legends of the Maori* that as a young man, the sight of some old warriors mourning the dead near his father's Orakau farm had motivated him to learn about Maori lore (1930: xvii). However, Parkman could devote more time to research because he had a family trust fund to draw upon. In comparison, Cowan appeared to have little financial freedom, but fortunately his employers – from the *Auckland Star* editor Thomson Leys onwards – saw the special qualities he possessed involving Maori relationships and allowed him to develop those relationships for mutual benefit.

Cowan's writing tends to mimic Parkman at times, so why did he adopt a similar thematic narrative style? Was it possible that a more hard-line historical approach might have proved unacceptable to a government sensitive to too much criticism about their predecessors' handling of the conflict? Perhaps Cowan perceived that by emulating a successful and popular war historian like Parkman he could include what is actually damning information about governing practices in nineteenth century New Zealand. For the advantage of seeking an affinity with Parkman was that he had a successful writing style of blending history with prose which, when combined, offered more expressive latitude than a 'no frills' approach in trying to explain the harsh and graphic realities inherent in any war history. For example, many of the soldiers or warriors described by both Cowan and Parkman were 'gallant' or 'noble', where in a modern historical text such assessments would be left for the reader to decide. But they were helpful bridging words all the same, especially during complex battle scenes, where they provided mental breaks for the reader between detailed descriptions of fighting tactics. They might also have proved useful to prevent being sued for defamation, since a little harmless flattery can go a long way.

The historian Peter Gibbons also noticed that Cowan imitated Parkman, but added that 'Cowan could not maintain the kind of controlled dramatic narrative that gives Parkman his lasting literary interest' (Gibbons in Sturm 63). Parkman certainly has an eloquent way of turning warfare into a brilliant

spectacle. For example, in *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* he wrote of an advance by Lord Abercrombie and his army of sixteen thousand:

On a brilliant July morning, he embarked his whole force for an attack on Ticonderoga. Many of those present have recorded with admiration the beauty of the spectacle, the lines of boats filled with troops stretching far down the lake, the flashing of oars, the glitter of weapons and the music ringing back from crags and rocks, or dying in mellowed strains among the distant mountains (Parkman 1908: 89).

Cowan also turned the march of an army into a dramatic narrative when he wrote about the Imperial advance into the Waikato in Chapter 36 of *The New Zealand Wars*. It was one of the few times in New Zealand where such a large army was in full view as a single entity. Here was General Cameron and an army of ten thousand descending on the Waikato region in all sorts of transports amidst the flashing of ancestral waka oars and the throb of new technology in the form of gunboats:

The river was alive with the steam flotilla and the boats and canoes of the transport service. Bend after bend of the broad Waikato was invaded by the steadily churning gunboat-paddles and the flashing oars of the heavy boats manned by the newly organized Water Transport Corps. The time-songs of Te Wheoro's and Kukutai's friendlies rang like war-cries along the Waikato as they came sweeping up in their long canoes, thirty or forty men apiece, and loaded, like the boats, with commissariat stores (*NZ Wars I*, 336).

Cowan's dramatic structure seems apt here because the masculine romance of that particular Waikato advance was one of the most visually splendid parts of that campaign. However, the main difference between the two writers in this respect was that Cowan usually reserved his dramatic prose to a couple of opening paragraphs in each chapter to help set the scene. After that, his writing would devolve into a war report until another particular scene might emerge and require a more intense and descriptive examination.

In the end however, despite any obvious influence by Parkman, a full reading of both volumes of *The New Zealand Wars* reveals such a paucity of

mentions of early American frontier life that one questions just how much of that American background Cowan ultimately drew upon. For example, there is frequent reference to the Maori warrior's use of the tomahawk as a weapon throughout both volumes. However, the American Indian did not have a cultural monopoly on the tomahawk. Peter Buck mentions in the *Coming of the Maori* (1987) that Maori converted tomahawks into weapons as soon as they became widely available (281). Also, in Volume One, Cowan draws a parallel between the Forest Rangers in New Zealand and a similar type of force in America when he wrote that of one of the first fights in the New Zealand Wars was 'conducted after the traditional manner of North American Indian warfare, skirmishing from tree to tree' (*NZ Wars I*, 300).

These examples amongst a handful of others represent the sum total of American frontier examples in the *New Zealand Wars*, which hardly constitutes a swamping of American pioneering culture upon a New Zealand environment. To compare the story of the North American continent – which the geographic mass of Australia can neatly fit into – with the comparatively small islands that constitute New Zealand seems somewhat contrary. This fact helps us understand why Cowan also needed to turn to other influences to explain the fate of these islands of the Pacific on the other side of the globe to Parkman's world.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94) is occasionally mentioned in *The New Zealand Wars* whenever Cowan got the opportunity to write about another of his favourite subject areas, the sea. The importance of this area should not be overlooked; virtually every campaign in the New Zealand Wars began with the delivery of troops and supplies via sea or river transport. The wars also took place during the early stages of a transition from the dominance of sail-powered vessels to steam-powered. Cowan's descriptions of the interior of New Zealand might have borne strong traces of Parkman, but Stevenson and his South Seas tracts reigned in Cowan's coastal descriptions, along with his own experiences of the Pacific. His forging of a literary connection with Stevenson also offers a fresh way of looking at *The New Zealand Wars* beyond any

discourse that it was predominantly based around North American frontier literature.

Cowan wrote that he first met Stevenson early in his journalism career during his daily round for the *Auckland Star*, which included checking on Auckland's port, 'when deep-sea arrivals always held the charm of the unexpected' (NZRM, May 1937: 59). In 1893 he interviewed Stevenson aboard the mail-steamer *Mariposa*, later recalling the encounter in an article for *New Zealand Railways Magazine*:

Stevenson was on his way from Samoa to Sydney; it was the year before his death, and he was indeed dying then. He looked pale and ill, as he sat there in the saloon; he was waiting for Sir George Grey to call on him, and I had a chance of a talk with him about his books and the troubled politics of Samoa. That pale, romantic figure is plain in the mind's eye, after all those years. Romantic is an ill-used adjective, yet I feel it is the right word here. His deep emotional eyes, with a humorous kindly glint, his lank black hair, rather long and rather damp-looking, his slender waxy-white hands, were features that do not pass from memory. Stevenson's eyes, the eyes of a poet and a lover of humanity, seemed Polynesian eyes too, the liquid eyes of the golden brown folk (NZRM, May 1937: 60).

Cowan's mention of 'the troubled politics of Samoa' referred to the contents of a book Stevenson had written a year earlier called *A Footnote to History* (1892). The book covered his observations of Samoan politics over an eight-year period. Cowan also visited Samoa in 1899 (Cowan 1936: 197), and when he later began writing *The New Zealand Wars*, his description of the conditions on Kororareka beach prior to the start of Hone Heke's War in the North appears as a composite of the two writers' shared experiences. In Chapter One, he began:

There are some bays in the South Pacific on whose shores wild history has been made – strands saturate with a hundred romantic, adventurous, and tragic memories. Pre-eminently one of these is the beach at Apia, in Samoa; another, steeped almost as deeply in early-days legend and war-time history is Kororareka, Bay of Islands (NZ Wars I, 7).

Cowan began Chapter Two in a similar vein while describing the uprising by Hone Heke:

Robert Louis Stevenson described the town on Apia Beach as the seat of political sickness of Samoa. Cosmopolitan Kororareka was the seat of the troubles of north New Zealand ... Hone Heke, one-time mission pupil, malcontent, and rebel general, played as bold a part in the drama of our early days as ever the patriotic Mataafa [Samoa high chief] enacted in his little world under Upolu's palms in the last two decades of the nineteenth century [Upolu is the name of the Samoan island on which Apia beach lies] (*NZ Wars I*, 14).

Here, Cowan is forging an affinity with Stevenson based around seeing the beaches at Apia and Kororareka as similar first points of conflict between cultures – as cultural frontiers. Towards the end of the nineteenth century Samoa was in turmoil as Germany, England, the United States and New Zealand vied with each other for commercial control of the island. A similar case could be argued for Kororareka during the 1840s, where ships operating under a multitude of flags re-provisioned in an environment that could best be described as lawless.

Cowan asks us to *picture* Kororareka as a 'straggling town, its single street fitting itself closely to the rim of the gravely beach ... no jetty, the boats of men-o'-war whalers, and trading craft alike are hauled up on the beach' (*NZ Wars I*, 7-8). Later, an officer from one of the vessels ventures into the town to buy provisions:

Follow the stores-buying captain or chief officer of the *Levi Starbuck* into one of the weatherboard trading houses, blue with strong tobacco smoke and thick with the tang of tarred rope. This interior is a typical South Sea warehouse; the proprietor is ship-chandler, sea-stock dealer, ironmonger and gunsmith, grog-seller, gunpowder-purveyor, and a dozen other trades. He can provide a ship with an anchor and cable, or set the Maoris on the track of Captain Ephraim J. Nye's runaway boat-steerer with admirable despatch;

provide a 300-ton barque with a complete new set of sails or sufficient muskets and ammunition to conquer a cannibal island (*NZ Wars I*, 10).

Regardless of how fictitious the quote at first appears, it is particularly apt because it introduces a third valuable source of material for Cowan. The *Auckland Star* was based in Shortland Street, a mere two blocks from Auckland's Waitemata Harbour, where Cowan knew the location of a particularly fertile story-ground, a ship's chandlery near the wharves that acted as a meeting place for visiting seafarers. It 'smelled beautifully, of tarred rope and paints and oils,' Cowan later wrote in *Suwarrow Gold* (1936), an anthology of maritime stories collected over a lifetime, adding:

The presiding genius fitted the place, a big whiskered sailorman, with a deep-sea gait, who had been a bos'n in clipper ships. And about the time the sun was over the foreyard, or a little later maybe, one could find a gathering of the skippers there – foreign-going, inter-colonial, coasting and Island. The nautical debates and the reminiscences and the cuffers there'd be! Often the old blind sailor Captain McCabe would be sitting there, making rope fenders for his daily bread, for there was no more sea for him, and some of his old friends would bear him company as he worked (Cowan 1936: 14-15).¹⁶

The key point from all this is that Cowan is drawing upon personal experience when he asks us to imagine scenarios such as at Kororareka, experiences he gathered either while visiting Samoa or the Auckland waterfront. This helps us understand why he was driven to visit every battle site depicted in *The New Zealand Wars*: he had to experience for himself what it was like to be there – the terrain, likely weather conditions, comrades (he was usually accompanied by former veterans) before writing about it. Some of his depictions may appear imaginative, but he clearly signals this by firstly writing, 'Picture this,' or something similar at the start of each depiction.

*

¹⁶ Two ships' chandleries still exist on the Auckland waterfront, their plethora of sails, wet weather gear and flotation devices harking back to a world of clipper ships and blind old sea captains.

III. Assessment

A good way to describe *The New Zealand Wars* is ‘as a multi-dimensional space, in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash,’ to quote Roland Barthes from his 1981 essay ‘The Death of an Author’ (Barthes in Lodge & Wood, 149). Indeed, *The New Zealand Wars* uses so many sources that at times Cowan could be accused of being merely a compiler. For example, Cowan acknowledges in his preface the assistance of nine key contributors (xiv-xv), twelve colonial soldiers (xv), eight contributors of historic pictures (xv), and 47 Maori individuals (xv-xvi). This is on top of any government records he had access to, plus his unimpeded access to the Alexander Turnbull Library (xv).

Cowan also mentions as sources 29 other books either in the text or as footnotes. Appendix E shows a bibliography of those books divided into various regions. From this we can see that the bulk of the books were by New Zealand writers [14], followed by American [10], British [3] and ‘Other’ [2]. The majority of the books were war histories including those written by Parkman [3], George Trevelyan [2] and Winston Churchill [1]. Even if Cowan did need to go outside New Zealand to find material about the wars, his overseas sources show how the wars were part of an international phenomenon, that great expansion of European power and influence which reached its zenith in the nineteenth century.

Fortunately, Barthes helps restore some credibility to Cowan’s authorship when in ‘The Death of the Author’ he recalls the anecdote about Thomas de Quincey, ‘who was so good at Greek that in order to translate absolutely modern ideas and images into that dead language, he ... created for himself an unfailing dictionary, vastly more extensive and complex than those resulting from the ordinary patience of purely literary themes’ (Barthes in Lodge & Wood, 149). The concept of having a personal dictionary on a particular subject, like that of the Greek scholar de Quincey, suggests that one reaches a stage of expertise far beyond the realms of one’s sources. This was the case with Cowan, who had built up over a quarter of a century an encyclopaedic knowledge of Maori and the New Zealand Wars period. So when he visited those former sites with his elderly witnesses, he applied his vast knowledge of the landscape and earlier research to what he now saw and heard. In the

process he created for himself new layers of understanding based on present and past experiences. Every battle at every site was then recreated from a variety of contributions, including the original journals of veterans, updated descriptions of the location by Cowan, and possibly some new anecdotes from the witnesses after having their memory jogged by revisiting the scene of their trauma, or adventure, depending upon which side they were on and how well they fared.

Another aspect worth mentioning is that although Cowan never acknowledges in his preface the contribution of James Hight, I would suggest that there was an indirect influence all the same. For *The New Zealand Wars* opens with the same argument that Hight made in his editor's note in *The Maoris of New Zealand* when he acknowledged 'that the presence of the Maori bestows on New Zealand, as contrasted with Australia, great historical interest. The early trading adventures, and the wars ... have given us much picturesque material and a military record, at times creditable to both Pakeha and Maori – which Australia entirely lacks' (Hight in Cowan 1910: ix). As examples of this sometimes creditable military record Cowan cited the Maori's amazement at the fury and relentlessness of the British charge across open ground against the fortifications of Ohaeawai Pa during the War in the North:

The Ngapuhi who – to their own amazement – had hurled back assaulting columns of the finest British infantry at Ohaewai had secret tremors at the forlorn hope's desperate courage; well they knew that in the end they could not hope to prevail over men of such mettle (NZ Wars I, 2).

In turn, the British were reminded of the selfless Maori devotion to kin when the women refused to leave their husbands during the encirclement and eventual devastation of Orakau Pa during the Waikato War. Here Cowan wrote:

And the soldier who saw women and even children facing death in a beleaguered redoubt of sod walls, choosing to die with their men rather than surrender, first marvelled at the devotion of such a race and then came to love them for their savage chivalry (NZ Wars I, 2-3).

Another reason why I want to include Hight among Cowan's influences is based on the discovery of his signature in the Massey University copy of Parkman's *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*, which Cowan mentions in his introduction as a key text. Obviously, this copy once came from Hight's personal library. Could Hight have introduced Cowan to Parkman when they were working together on *The Maoris of New Zealand*, even loaned him this very book? The link cannot be proven but there is scant evidence in Cowan's earlier books of his creating parallels between New Zealand and American frontiers *before* teaming up with Hight in 1910 to write *The Maoris of New Zealand*.

One final aspect of the book worth mentioning is its careful use of images to augment the text. *The New Zealand Wars* has either an illustration, photograph, plan or sketch-map on every fourth page. Photographs and sketches that Cowan took on-site are easily detected in the text because Cowan always added his name beneath any caption, again, to emphasize some original input. In this respect Cowan was continuing the philosophy of a former employer, the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts, which exploited photography as an important ingredient of government travel guides. *The New Zealand Wars* continues this idea of a text serving multiple purposes – in this case as a travel guide and as history. The volumes have close-set type and are printed on thin paper, which suggests that they were designed to be compact and portable.¹⁷

Cowan was reinventing the way history might be experienced, where exploring a New Zealand past could also become an outdoor adventure. His extensive endnotes at the end of chapters included what remained to be seen of former battle sites for the modern visitor. How this approach worked in practice was outlined earlier in the literature survey when Michael King wrote in his introduction to the 1983 reprint of *The New Zealand Wars* of finding 'a detailed account of what happened militarily in the neighbourhood in 1846. Most important to me, the account was supplemented with

¹⁷ Perhaps the 1983 reprint continued this ethos by covering the volumes in vinyl, which, although an old-fashioned style for covering books, is more rugged and weather-resistant.

maps, photographs and descriptions of combat scenes that enabled me to pinpoint and to stand on each site' (*NZ Wars I*, v).

So when James Belich later wrote in 1986 that Cowan had 'a cultural mission in mind' when writing *The New Zealand Wars* (Belich 1986: 16), he was quite correct. He was referring to a footnote that Cowan had inserted on costumes worn by the Maori participants 'for the guidance of artists who may some day essay to paint the historic scene at Orakau' (*NZ Wars I*, 394). For Cowan, imagery was an important aid in recreating history. 'A great deal of trouble has been taken to obtain original illustrations,' he wrote in the preface, 'and Mr A. H. Messenger, draughtsman in the New Zealand Forest Service, himself a member of a pioneer Taranaki family, has drawn for the History many pictures in line and wash from authentic material' (*NZ Wars I*, xvi).

But perhaps Belich was later grateful that Cowan *had* 'a cultural mission in mind' when his own turn came to present the New Zealand Wars in visual form to a later audience. In 1998 Belich helped to produce a five-part television series called *The New Zealand Wars*. Much of the series involved Belich describing what happened on location, no doubt aided by Cowan's careful observations through drawings and maps, especially as he added diagrams of the actual physical dimensions and layout of each fighting pa. In essence, Belich was walking in the footsteps of Cowan long after farmers had ploughed into oblivion many of the 200 ancient battle sites. Without Cowan's detailed recording, and his oral histories recorded on-site, it would have been far harder for Belich to recreate that world sixty years later.

5 Later Developments

The Maoris in the Great War (1926)

The Maoris in the Great War (1926) represents the final volume in Cowan's New Zealand Wars history, and in many ways supplies the 'missing link' to how he might initially have conceived the project. This is admittedly speculative; *The Maoris in the Great War* is a standalone book, giving a self-contained history in its own right. But when Whitcombe and Tombs published the book its dimensions were identical to *The New Zealand Wars*, and it fits seamlessly next to those volumes as a three-volume trilogy. As well, Cowan still had some unfinished business when he completed *The New Zealand Wars*. For if we refer back to Peter Fraser's eulogy of Cowan in *Tales of the Maori Border* (1944), Fraser wrote that Cowan

taught the larger lesson of mutual understanding; he saw the two cultures Maori and Pakeha, meet and clash; he had profound knowledge of the dignity and beauty of both; *and his life work was dedicated to their fusion* [my italics] (Cowan 1944: Foreword).

But there was no happy ending at the end of *The New Zealand Wars*, as Cowan pointed out in the final chapter called 'Frontier Perils and Final Peace'. He documented an uneasy truce along the Waikato border separating Europeans from King Country Maori until a ritual surrender by Maori in 1881. He also wrote of the suppressing of Te Whiti's followers at Parihaka in Taranaki in 1881, and the crushing of a pocket of Maori resistance at Hokianga in 1898 (*NZ Wars II*, 473-4, 485, 488, 500-1). If a long term Maori-Pakeha peace was important to Cowan, his history had not chronicled that outcome, except by force.

Up to now, this possible link between *The Maoris in the Great War* and *The New Zealand Wars* as one combined entity has been overlooked. The former has received little critical mention since its publication in 1926, three years after *The New Zealand Wars*. Despite that, *The Maoris in the Great War*

represents a milestone for Cowan because it was one of the few times he ventured to write about events happening in the twentieth century (apart from in his travel books). Cowan was commissioned to write the book on behalf of the Maori Regimental Committee, and its release was targeted to coincide with Anzac Day 1926 (Cowan 1926: xii, ix). To write it, Cowan drew heavily upon the war diaries of the contingent's commanders, which comprised a daily record of troop movements. He does not attempt to explain the full compass of the war; for wider explanations he frequently guides the reader towards existing First World War histories.¹⁸

His personal contribution to the work lies in the opening two chapters, which are based in New Zealand and cover the recruiting of Maori leading up to the sailing of the *Westmoreland* from Wellington carrying the first contingent of Maori soldiers. Cowan was too old to fight; he was aged 44 at the start of the First World War, so he was outside the cut-off age for enlisting of 40. He did not have the opportunity of walking the battle sites as he had for *The New Zealand Wars*, however he did manage to report on the war by writing newspaper reports using information gleaned from official casualty lists printed in the Maori gazette *Kahiti* (Cowan 1926: 57).

The book chronicles the fortunes of a Maori contingent that numbered 518 at the start of the First World War and came to be known as the Maori Pioneer Battalion by 1917, when it had expanded to four times its original size, even then comprising only two percent of New Zealand's contribution to the war, known collectively as the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (Crawford & McGibbon 16).

But could its recruits demonstrate that they were as good a generation of soldier as those from their grandfathers' era? For Cowan had earlier written in *The Maoris of New Zealand* (1910) that the old warrior strain had been lost in the new generation of Maori leaders by their trying too hard to emulate European ways (1910: 7). Could his old argument now be challenged with a renewed call to arms? To answer that question, Cowan firstly drew parallels

¹⁸ It was reprinted in 2004 [paperback] and 2006 [hardback] by English publishing firm Naval and Military Press in dimensions identical to the original and on a similar ivory-coloured paper. However, the motive behind its publication was probably because it suited the portfolio of Naval and Military Press as a war history rather than any desire to preserve a Cowan text.

between Maori tribal organisation and the concept of 'empire' like the British Empire to imply a shared heritage:

It was easy for the modern Maori to appreciate the importance of united action in defence of the congeries of great families called the British Empire. He was quick to perceive the truth of the motto that unity is strength, and to realise that his duty as a citizen of the Empire was to come in alignment with his white brothers and cousins against the common danger (Cowan 1926: 1).

For Cowan, Maori society was a miniature version of the British Empire. Maori already had a military tradition spanning back centuries, where the tribe came first. It had first draw upon its warriors at the behest of their chiefs to put right any perceived wrongs, so they knew what it was like to give up everything for a cause.

Cowan continued by mentioning that census figures had revealed an increasing Maori population, which was rapidly adapting to the requirements of Pakeha civilisation. But if Maori were to be seen as equals with the Pakeha, they had to acquit themselves accordingly. Cowan saw the impending battle as an opportunity for Maori and reminded them that the old warriors still lingered amongst them:

The Maori we used to see, the tall, straight-backed old athlete, tattooed to the height of the moko art, alert and active even in old age, the old scout and bush warrior skilled in all the work of entrenchment, ambushade, fort-storming and forest tactics, was for all purposes a perfect fighting man (Cowan 1926: 2).

A few still survived in the villages of the King Country, the Urewera, and on the Bay of Plenty coast, but Cowan questioned if modern Maori, 'reared in a semi-Pakeha environment, college-bred, interested more in the new ways, new tasks and new amusements, thinking too little of his ancestral traditions – would he acquit himself as well as his grandfather on the field of battle?' He tried placing *himself* in the argument as if he was talking like a paternal elder to a grandson. In a reference to his childhood upbringing at Orakau, he wrote:

But we who had known the Maori from earliest years, who had Maori play-mates at school and had lived and worked and travelled with native friends, knew better, knew that the hereditary love of war and the national traits of pride and courage had not been extinguished by a few years on non-necessity for exertion in ways military (Cowan 1926: 2).

For young Maori, the loss of mana by not enlisting would have been all pervading, a sort of emotional blackmail to enlist. For what the contemporary reader cannot feel is the war euphoria at the time and the subsequent implications for any able-bodied New Zealander *of any race* if they failed to take their turn in the front lines. The more who enlisted, the more the risk of dying was spread, so the rationale went, and the greater the chance that one's loved one might come home alive. According to Glynn Harper in his book *Images of War* (2008), this concern for loved ones at the front by those waiting behind should not be underestimated, and when it melded with a continual 'diet of imperialism' it created over time a New Zealand society that became militaristic and intolerant of those who did not accede to a seemingly very public will. 'Conformity to the war effort was demanded,' Harper added, 'dissent was greeted with hostility and punitive action. Those suspected of shirking their duties or of being disloyal encountered intense resentment. White Feather leagues roamed the streets looking for young men they suspected of avoiding war duties (Harper 313-4).

The upshot of all this was that the Maori villages lost their most able-bodied men, a dilemma which Cowan softened by drawing parallels with other communities that had also lost their young men all around the British Empire – on the Highland glens, in the English shires and on the New Zealand Pakeha farms, for 'it was a matter of shame to be found lagging behind' (1926: 3). However, not all tribes succumbed to the coercion. The Waikato, Taranaki and Urewera tribes initially refused to fight a war between what looked to them like Europeans fighting other Europeans. The most forthcoming were from the tribes who had supported the Government during the New Zealand Wars (Gould in McGibbon 2000: 296b, 298a)

And so on the morning of 14 February 1915 the first Maori contingent steamed out of Wellington harbour. They had been christened 'Te Hokow-

hitu A Tu', or 'The Seventy Twice-told Warriors of the War God', in a reference to the favoured number of 140 warriors for a war party, even though this contingent numbered over 500. Farewell speeches mentioned that every departing soldier was 'about to take that long, long sea-road to the faraway land of his birth in the mists of time'. They represented 'a crusading army, upholding the name and fame of the Maori to the world' (Cowan 1926: 15-6).

Amongst them was a Ngapuhi farmer named Private Huirua Rewha. Official records list his father as Temamae Rewha of Russell (Pugsley 88). While stationed at Malta and about to be shipped to Gallipoli, Private Rewha wrote home what he thought might be his last letter:

Come to me, go from me, my letter of love to my parents, Rewha and Mae. Vaguely the thought steals through my mind that this is my last letter. That is why I greet you thus. So, again, goodbye to all at home, to all my relations who live there, and whom I did not see before leaving. Only if luck guides my steps shall I return. For the order has come that we are to move to the forefront of the battle, to enter the scorching flame of the firing line. For many days we have been quite ready. We Maoris are now off to strike – to finish what we came for. The head officers of our party are here after greeting us, and are now instructing us in methods of warfare. Your letter of love has come to me. I am well; my only grief is I hear nothing but the English voice. It is so; therefore, I must not grieve. I now feel my spirit, my soul, my whole body are not mine now. Never mind (Cowan 1926: 25).

The first action they encountered was during the failed Gallipoli campaign of 1915, after which the depleted contingent merged with other contingents to become known as the Maori Pioneer Battalion. Each participating country supplied its own pioneer battalions to support their own troops. Their primary task involved preparing the infrastructure for war: repairing access roads and trenches, creating communication lines, milling timber for posts, hauling water (Gould in McGibbon 2000: 297). The Maori Battalion therefore never had the chance to launch an ambush like their forefathers, and had only two opportunities at 'fort-storming', once at Gallipoli and another time in France. Sadly, the battalion's casualty rate was high for a group not consistently involved in frontal assaults. Almost half of the

eventual contingent of 2227 were either killed or wounded [336 killed, 734 wounded] (Cowan 1926: 8).

But if the Armistice in 1918 came as a relief to the survivors, it also created a new set of problems. As soon as hostilities ceased and the Pioneers were to embark from France bound for England there were disciplinary problems. A Pioneer shot and killed an officer on New Year's Eve and two more were convicted of rape (Pugsley 77). According to Cowan, the soldiers seemed to have taken leave of their senses (1926: 157). For four long years they had been thrust into frontline duties and were now being told to adjust back to civilian life as best they could. Instead of believing in themselves as a unit against a common foe it was now a competition between individuals during peacetime.

The dilemma of accommodating the demobilised Pioneer had now arisen – and all returned troops for that matter – but a key point here is that the Pioneers were apparently *not expected to come back*. Cowan alluded to that notion by quoting a letter written in February 1917 by Sir Maui Pomare, who had been on the committee recruiting the Pioneers. Pomare was replying to Major Peter Buck, who was still in the field and had written to Pomare rather dejectedly suggesting that it did not really matter if the battalion was wiped out. Pomare replied:

I agree with you that the training, the influence, and the discipline that the men are receiving at the Front will mean a great awakening for the Maoris, and I agree with your sentiment that 'what matters if we were wiped out, for it is a damned sight better to go out in a big thing than to fritter away in idle security at home'. Your boys have proved beyond a doubt what the race is capable of, and, more than that, in the reshuffling of Empire the Maori will hold a respected place (Cowan 1926: 104).

Pomare might have been only trying to console Buck, but the implication was that if the Pioneers were to die on the battlefield, it would create a legacy of Maori sharing the burden of suffering alongside their Pakeha brother. For it seemed that prospects back in New Zealand for demobilised soldiers were so poor that their best use was as a collective legend of noble sacrifice.

In early 1919 the *Westmoreland* steamed into Auckland Harbour with the survivors of the Maori Pioneer Battalion aboard. Cowan described the welcome home celebrations as ‘a scene of old Maoridom revived, the return of the war-party from the fighting trail’. When they ‘marched through the flag-decorated city cheered by thousands’ (1926: 160), it was as if the final curtain in a great Maori war narrative had come down. What had begun in 1845 with the cutting down of a flagpole at Kororareka by Hone Heke’s warriors had finally ended 74 years later with a return along the ‘long, long sea-road’ by Te Hokowhitu A Tu, the Warriors of the War God.

And contrary to the opinions of Maui Pomare and Peter Buck, it *was* vitally important that there were some survivors to continue the legend of the Maori warrior. Cowan had earlier mentioned that old warriors from the New Zealand Wars still survived in the villages of the King Country, the Urewera, and on the Bay of Plenty Coast (1926: 2). Their subsequent oral histories, collected by Cowan, told the stories of those who died in the New Zealand Wars. Now the surviving Pioneers could become the voices for those who did not come back from the First World War, and would keep *their* memories alive. So the book had a social role to play for Maori, reminding a later generation of their connection with a distant past, and another set of wars.

Epilogue

In 1995 Christopher Pugsley updated Cowan’s history in *Te Hokowhitu A Tu: The Maori Pioneer Battalion in the First World War*. The book marked the occasion of a formal ceremony in which the battalion’s flag, which had been missing for several decades, was returned to the New Zealand army. Pugsley’s version does not add significantly to what Cowan wrote seventy years earlier, mainly because archives from the First World War had been taken to the rubbish tip in the 1930s during the construction of Wellington’s Dominion Museum. Less than twenty percent of that material was later recovered (Pugsley 1995: 7). This meant that Cowan had more intact information to work with than any subsequent war historian. Indeed in the preface to his book, Pugsley acknowledges Cowan as the major authority on the subject, and drew upon most of the same diaries as Cowan (Pugsley 1995: 7).

6 Conclusion

This thesis has looked at the early twentieth century writer James Cowan (1870-1943), who is remembered today mostly for his twin volumes on *The New Zealand Wars* (1922-23). The main question that this thesis sought to answer was: Does James Cowan show enough evidence of a coherent historiography to justify being labelled an historian? If not, then any harsh criticism by later writers is perhaps justified. However, if there is such evidence, then he might be described as rather ‘unjustly neglected’.

I have claimed that Cowan should be remembered not only for *The New Zealand Wars* but the four books comprising his New Zealand Wars narrative. In this context *The Maoris of New Zealand* is as important a book as *The Adventures of Kimble Bent* and *The Maoris in the Great War* because they all reveal different stages in an unwinding story.

The fact that Cowan did not continue writing books in such a formal vein as *The New Zealand Wars* and *The Maoris in the Great War* helps us understand why he has often been neglected as a serious historian. His early and later life was dominated by journalism, which has never carried the prestige of histories. That being so, Cowan managed to write some unique books in his later career, including *Legends of the Maori* (1930), *Suwarrow Gold* (1936) and *Settlers and Pioneers* (1940). In short, he was an all-rounder, capable of turning his hand to the many tangents of his specialities in Maori and ‘the sea’.

Unfortunately, being an all-rounder is not necessarily appreciated in a scholarly world, which prefers academics to be specialists in their chosen discipline. However, being an all-rounder was vital for a journalist. So, for academics, it would always appear that Cowan could not be considered a specialist in history by the mere fact of drifting outside the discipline. He had no long-term credentials in that field.

However, as long as we add the modern tag of Cowan writing for a general readership as a ‘public historian’, we can immediately position him in relation to academic historians. For example, over seventy years after Cowan, another historian, Anne Salmond, would emulate Cowan’s technique in oral

and documentary recording for her book *New Worlds* (1997), which looked at Maori and European interaction – both peaceful and hostile – between 1773 and 1815. In her preface Salmond wrote that ‘[d]ocumentary and oral accounts illuminate the past in bits and pieces, and from particular angles’. She added that ‘[i]n writing this work, I have gathered these fragments like a magpie, storing them in archive boxes and filing cabinets’ (Salmond 14).

Cowan also gathered fragments of Maoridom like a magpie, storing them away in copious notebooks, and would later piece them together to create a narrative of Maori-Pakeha interaction and reconciliation. I am not implying a closer affinity between Cowan and Salmond, but merely to point out that Cowan’s research methods are still being used today. They have not been totally superseded. One suspects they never can be.

* *

Appendix A

James Cowan's Books – Chronological

(Main Source: Taylor 1941, updated)

1901

- *Maori Biographies. Sketches of Old New Zealand: Descriptive Catalogue of Maori Portraits Painted by Herr G. Lindauer.* Auckland: Brett Printing and Publishing.
- *Lake Taupo and the Volcanoes: Scenes from Lake and Mountain and Tales from Maori Folk-Lore.* Auckland: Geddis and Blomfield. Reprinted 2004 by Tongariro Natural History Society.

1906

New Zealand Lakes and Fiords: The Wonders of Western Otago. (Not ascribed to Cowan) Wellington: Govt. Printer.

1907

New Zealand, or Ao-tea-roa: The Long Bright World. Wellington: Govt. Printer, 1908. Revised second edition 1908.

1910

- *The Maoris of New Zealand.* Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs.
- *Official Record of the New Zealand International Exhibition of Arts and Industries.* Wellington: Govt. Printer. Cowan finished writing the book in 1907.

1911

The Adventures of Kimble Bent. Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs.

1912

Pelorus Jack: The White Dolphin of French Pass, New Zealand with Maori Legends. Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs. Second edition 1930.

1913

New Zealand Cities: Auckland. Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs.

1914

Samoa and Its Story. Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs.

1916

New Zealand Cities: Christchurch. Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs.

1922

- *The Old Frontier: Te Awamutu, the Story of the Waipa Valley*. Te Awamutu: Waipa Post.
- (1922-23) *The New Zealand Wars and the Pioneering Period*. Wellington: Govt Printer. Vol. I, 1922; Vol. II, 1923. Reprinted 1955, 1983.

1923

Maori Folk-Tales of the Port Hills, Canterbury, New Zealand. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs. Second edition 1954.

1925

Fairy Folk Tales of the Maori. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs. Second edition 1930.

1926

- *The Maoris in the Great War: Gallipoli, 1915; France and Flanders, 1916-18*. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs.
- *Travel in New Zealand, the Island Dominion: Its Life and Scenery*. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs. Vol. I, North Is.; Vol. II, South Is.

1927

The Tongariro National Park: Its Topography, Geology, Alpine and Volcanic Features, History and Maori Folk-lore. Wellington: Tongariro National Park Board.

1928

- *The North Island Main Trunk Railway: A Descriptive and Historical Story*. Wellington: Govt. Printer.
- *The South Island Main Trunk Line*. Wellington: Publicity Branch, NZ Railways.

1930

- *The Maori Yesterday and Today*. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs.
- *Tales of the Maori Coast*. Wellington: Fine Arts.
- *Legends of the Maori, Vol 1*. Wellington: Fine Arts.
- *– Text only by Cowan: *Pictures of Old New Zealand: The Partridge Collection of Maori Paintings by Gottfried Lindauer*. Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs.

1932

Fairy Tales from the South Seas. Auckland: Whitcombe & Tombs.

1934

- *Tales of the Maori Bush*. Dunedin: Reed.
- *– Edited only by Cowan: *Legends of the Maori, Vol 2*. Written by Sir Maui Pomare. Wellington: Harry H. Tombs.

1935

- *Hero Stories of New Zealand*. Wellington: H. H. Tombs, 1935.
- *A Trader in Cannibal Land: The Life and Adventures of Captain Tapsell*. Dunedin: Reed, 1935. 158p.

1936

- *Maori & Pakeha*. Dunedin: Reed, 1936. 2 vols.
- *Suwarrow Gold, and Other Stories of the Great South Sea*. London: Jonathan Cape. 1938, translated into German as *Wilde Sudsee*. Leipzig: Goldmann.

1938

Rotorua: Wonderland of the World. Rotorua: Rotorua Morning Post.

1939

New Zealand's First Century: the Dominion's Scene and Story. Wellington: Dept. Tourism & Publicity.

1940

- *Settlers and Pioneers*. Wellington: Govt. Printer, 1940.
- *Sir Donald Maclean: The Story of a New Zealand Statesman*. Dunedin: Reed, 1940.

Books Published Posthumously**1944**

Tales of the Maori Border. Wellington: Reed, 1944.

1959

The Caltex Book of Maori Lore. Wellington: Reed, 1959. 63p

1982

Tales of the Maori. Wellington: Reed, by permission of Govt. Printer.

Appendix B

James Cowan's Books – Thematic

Non-fiction, misc. from 1901

- 1901 *Sketches of Old New Zealand* (biographies)
- 1922 *The Old Frontier* (regional history)
- 1930 - *The Maori Yesterday and Today* (ethno-history)
- *Pictures of Old New Zealand* (biographies)
- 1940 - *Sir Donald Maclean* (biography)

Travel Writing, from 1901

- 1901 *Lake Taupo and the Volcanoes*
- 1916 *New Zealand Cities: Christchurch*
- 1926 *Travel in New Zealand, the Island Dominion*
- 1927 *The Tongariro National Park*
- 1928 *The North and South Island Main Trunk Railways*
- 1938 *Rotorua: Wonderland of the World*

Government Publicity, from 1906

- 1906 *New Zealand Lakes and Fiords*
- 1907 *New Zealand, or Ao-tea-roa: The Long Bright World*
- 1910 *Official Record of the New Zealand International Exhibition of Arts and Industries 1906-07*
- 1939 *New Zealand's First Century*

NZ Wars Narrative, from 1910

- 1910 *The Maoris of New Zealand*
- 1911 *The Adventures of Kimble Bent*
- 1922-3 *The New Zealand Wars Vols. 1 & II*
- 1926 *The Maoris in the Great War*
- 1935 *Hero Stories of New Zealand*
- 1940 *Settlers and Pioneers* (memoir)

Maritime, from 1912

- 1912 *Pelorus Jack: The White Dolphin of French Pass*
- 1913 *New Zealand Cities: Auckland* (Auckland as a South Seas port)
- 1914 *Samoa and Its Story*
- 1935 – *A Trader in Cannibal Land* (biography)
– *Fairy Tales from the South Seas*
- 1936 *Suwarrow Gold, and Other Stories of the Great South Seas*

Polynesian Folklore, from 1923

- 1923 *Maori Folk-Tales of the Port Hills* [Canterbury]
- 1925 *Fairy Folk Tales of the Maori*
- 1930 *Legends of the Maori, Vol. 1*

Short Story Anthologies, from 1930

- 1930 *Tales of the Maori Coast*
- 1934 *Tales of the Maori Bush*
- 1944 *Tales of the Maori Border* (posthumous)
- 1982 *Tales of the Maori* (posthumous)

Children's Books, from 1936

- 1936 *Maori and Pakeha* (school bulletin)
- 1959 *The Caltex Book of Maori Lore* (posthumous)

Appendix D

Cowan's Oral and Documentary sources for *The New Zealand Wars*

Key:

- Soldier rankings indicate highest ranking upon retirement (where possible).
- Page numbers in bold denote oral narratives to Cowan on an actual battle site (where stated by Cowan).
- Name in brackets denotes tribal affiliation (where stated by Cowan).

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Free, W. H. (Lieutenant), of New Plymouth, 198.

Bates, H. Stretton of England (Colonel, 65th Reg.), unpublished manuscript lent by his son, H. D. Bates of Wanganui, 206-10.

Bezar, E. (Sergeant-Major, 57th Reg.), of Wellington. **Note to Cowan in 1921**, 217, 219n-20n; 224, 226-7.

Rushton, J. R. (Captain), of Kutarere, Ohiwa Harb.. Letter to Cowan, 228-9.

Ch. 26-40, Auckland & Waikato, 1863-4

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Appendix E

Cowan's *New Zealand Wars* Bibliography by Region

(New Zealand, America, Britain, Other)

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[N.B. Contains a novel perspective of a Maori view of the wars by McDonnell writing as a warrior under the pseudonym of Kowhai Ngutu Kaka. A great idea that ended up but somewhat fanciful.]

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Te Hokioi ['The War-bird'] Kingite newspaper (I, 238)

The New Zealander, 2 August 1845 (I, 5)

The Southern Cross, Auckland, August 1863 (I, 265)

Britain

Illustrated London News, 1864 (I, 227)

Appendix F

Supplementary New Zealand Wars Texts

Travel in New Zealand (1926)

Travel in New Zealand: The Island Dominion came out in 1926 in two volumes, one volume covering the North Island and the other the South. By travel guide standards it was an elaborate production, comprising two hardbacks totalling 442 pages with a separate index for each volume. In the context of the *New Zealand Wars*, what makes this book special is that Cowan tried to incorporate the old battle sites as a tourist attraction, but with limited success. He could only write about the sites whose locations were handy to main arterial tourist routes, that is, routes that the Government wanted to feed its tourist traffic along, which were linked to its railway network and established tourist venues like Rotorua. And by this time many former battle sites were on private property and had been converted to farmland, or had eroded away to form only a vague ditch or mound. Cowan was also compelled to write sparingly due to a chronic shortage of word space.

Despite those limitations, the volumes remain as a legacy of a virtual solo crusade to keep the New Zealand Wars alive, for by the time of the book's release the First World War held recent memory, not some nineteenth century war. Fortunately Cowan's early attempt at creating a historical trail for a later generation of tourists was not altogether a lost cause. Today, local heritage trails form part of tourist packages of many small towns trying to attract visitors, so Cowan can be seen as making a pioneering contribution to that concept.

Hero Stories of New Zealand (1935)

At first glance *Hero Stories of New Zealand* seems like a blatant copy of the title and style of *Hero Tales from American History* (1901) an anthology of stories on the early pioneering types who emerged as American legends-cum-role models, like Daniel Boone and George Washington. The anthology was co-written by Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt. Cowan lists both Lodge and Roosevelt as influences in the introductory chapter of *The New Zealand Wars*,

but, although the American and New Zealand book titles sound almost identical, Cowan's version is not nearly as fawning towards its subjects. Roosevelt went on to become the twenty-sixth President of the United States, and he needed American heroes for political purposes. Cowan's version was more interested in documenting the feats of ordinary people, both men and women, who had no claim to fame apart from showing acts of courage, mostly during the New Zealand Wars.

Indeed, despite its rather corny title, *Hero Stories of New Zealand* is largely a collection of biographical profiles from *The New Zealand Wars*, along with an updating of any new material. For example, one story in particular is a sort of 'putting right' for Maori. It was called 'The Swordsman in the Swamp' and told of the putting to death of Lieutenant Brooke following an above attempt by the Fortieth Regiment to capture Puketakauere pa near Waitara in North Taranaki on 27 June 1860. Brooke was killed either with a tomahawk in the back or after surrendering his sword, according to European published accounts (Cowan 1935: 58-9). However, Cowan reported a second-hand account that the chief who killed Brooke, named Haowhenua, had first challenged the lieutenant, who was making his way through a swamp, and told him to give up his sword. 'Now, had he reversed it and handed it to me hilt first, holding it by the point, I would have taken it as a token of surrender,' Haowhenua reportedly said. 'I would not have killed him but permitted him to escape. But he held it out to me point first, and that as you know means death.' While others looked on, a fierce fight ensued between the swordsman and the warrior, armed with a taiaha. Brooke fell from a blow to the temple from the ancient Maori weapon. Haowhenua continued:

And when I stood there, recovering my breath after the fight, and I looked down at my fighting friend, lying there in the rushes, I felt sorrow for him. Yes, I wept tears for him. I tangi'd over the pakeha I had slain. Do you think it strange that I should tangi over my fallen foe? It was but the way warriors should honour each other. ... And I stooped and picked up his sword, a chieftain's weapon, as my trophy of the combat, and I have it now. Was it not a fair fight? I took no unfair advantage of him (Cowan 1935: 60-61).

The story is second-hand, but at least Cowan had given Maori a chance to put things right. And in some ways Lieutenant Brooke came out better in this version than in the official report because he put up a fight. The anecdote also reveals how the richness of the material helps elevate *Hero Stories of New Zealand* beyond its American inspiration into an authentic *local* version.

***Settlers and Pioneers* (1940)**

Settlers and Pioneers was released as part of the *Centennial Surveys*, a set of eleven volumes commemorating a century of European colonisation since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. The book is partly a sentimental journey through Cowan's childhood days, but considering that his childhood was set amidst the turmoil of a post-war environment, it was hard to expect anything *but* controversy from what he had to write, unless he fudged the truth to suit the celebratory format of the *Centennial Surveys*.

In his book's preface, Cowan warned the reader of what to expect. He wrote that although the book covered the whole of New Zealand, it was mainly concerned with 'the frontiers, the Upper Waikato, the King Country borders, Taranaki, the Bay of Plenty, where the settler, long after the actual military campaigns with horse, foot, and artillery, was compelled to fight to hold the confiscated land that often by moral right belonged to the Maori' (1940: vii-viii). To emphasise that it was a memoir, he added:

In all this I have drawn chiefly on my own knowledge and experience, the spirit of the environment in which I was reared, and the narratives of my people, Pakeha and Maori; for the Ngati Maniapoto and Waikato [tribes] and their kindred are as much my own folk from my earliest years as any of my Pakeha blood (Cowan 1940: vii-viii).

Unfortunately for Cowan, the *Centennial Surveys* editorial committee wanted to produce a set of histories that were popular yet scholarly, which apparently excluded memoirs. One of the committee members, David Hall, mentioned in a memo that Cowan had apparently confused 'sentiment with history', and that *Settlers and Pioneers* 'belongs to the tradition of New Zea-

land history writing which the Centennial Publications programme was designed to supersede' (Barrowman in Renwick 168-9).

Just what *was* now expected was left to the general editor of the *Centennial Surveys* to explain, the Cambridge-trained scholar Eric McCormick. In a memo sent to all contributors McCormick outlined his thematic vision for their work:

Now the 'idea' which seems to me of fundamental importance in any consideration of New Zealand history is this; that 100 years ago a sample of nineteenth century society and civilisation was transferred to New Zealand and has since then been reshaped and adapted, with varying degrees of success, to conform with the conditions of a new environment – i.e. natural surroundings and climate, a new order of society, special economic conditions, a native people and all the other elements which constitute environment in its widest sense. It is the process of *adaptation* with its record of trials and errors and its continuous subjection to fresh influences from outside which seems to me might be *the underlying theme of the surveys* [my italics] (McEldowney in Sturm 654).

In fairness to McCormick, the memo is much longer than the portion presented above. But the point is that his theme of 'adaptation' could have been made much clearer. It might have made sense to McCormick, but if the *Centennial Surveys* were meant to target a general audience, some of these concepts might have been too vague or ethereal for the writers to translate into popular prose.

McCormick had also written a volume for the *Centennial Surveys*, which pointed out how the early historians of Cowan's era had now been superseded. It was called *Letters and Art in New Zealand* (1940) and was a history of New Zealand writing and painting since 1840. In the book McCormick wrote that by the 1920s a distinctive literature by a group of New Zealand-born writers had emerged, writing chiefly non-fiction, in particular history and anthropology. That group had assumed 'impressive proportions' because of a growing interest in New Zealand's past (1940: 148-9): But he added that they were 'usually self-trained and often hampered by lack of means and the most elementary facilities for research':

It is a scholarship which inevitably reflects these circumstances: it sometimes leans too heavily on the oral reminiscence and may, on occasion, exasperate through its blithe disregard of source and reference; on the other hand, it has colour and concreteness gained from direct contact with repositories of history, while it shows the zest of work undertaken not for gain not as academic labour but from deep-rooted, even passionate, interest in the past (McCormick 1940: 149).

For examples of these early historians and/or anthropologists, McCormick listed S. Percy Smith, Elsdon Best and Thomas Lindsay Buick. He also mentioned Cowan, but not as part of the above group. McCormick described Cowan as a journalist, one of several contributors to the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* who would later 'find a permanent niche in New Zealand letters' (1940: 124). *The New Zealand Wars* was mentioned only as a footnote to McCormick's discussion of Gudgeon's *Reminiscences of the War in New Zealand* (1940: 78, 78n).

McCormick's critique of the most significant contributions to literature and art was always going to be a thankless task, given the necessity to leave out at least *some* writers. However, McCormick could write whatever he wanted in his *own* book, as long as his preferences [or prejudices] did not tarnish his work as editor for the *Centennial Surveys*. Unfortunately for some of the contributors, McCormick believed that any weaknesses in the *Surveys* came from those appointed to write them, according to his later memoir *An Absurd Ambition* (1996). Many of these contributors were 'old cobbles' of his supervisor Joseph Heenan, the Undersecretary of the Department of Internal Affairs, Cowan amongst them (1996: 146).

Before writing *Settlers and Pioneers*, Cowan had enjoyed a successful late career as a columnist for *New Zealand Railways Magazine* from 1928. Cowan wrote three separate columns, under his own name and two pen names, for virtually every monthly issue, and was variously perceived as a public historian and a Maori scholar by his readers. [He had also written a dozen more books since 1928 in various subject areas.] However, McCormick wrote in his memoir that Cowan 'was obsessed with the idea that New Zealand had a romantic past which ought to appeal to schoolboys like the American wild

west. A journalist is writing for the day and looks to be startling, and this cannot be eradicated' (1996: 146).

What else was wrong with *Settlers and Pioneers*, then, apart from being a memoir and written by a journalist? There were plenty of similar volumes in the *Centennial Surveys*, as not every writer had caught on to the new direction in New Zealand historical writing. At first glance, *Settlers and Pioneers* appears to be a collection of vignettes of New Zealand's pioneering era augmented with Cowan's personal memories. The first part of the book follows a chronological line, the second part is thematic, and the final part consists of sketches about pioneering types, like the 'smithy' or blacksmith, the country doctor and country parson (127, 132, 137).

Part One of the book draws upon the diary of a family of settlers, who eventually settled on an allotment at Pukekohe in what today is known as South Auckland. By the third chapter the settlers have built a crude homestead but have to farewell their Maori neighbours, who must move several kilometres further south to the Waikato in order to be with their kin during an impending war. By this action we know that Chapter Three is set in the early-to-mid 1860s because the Waikato War ran between 1864-66.

But after Chapter Three there is a huge jump in chronological time. Chapter Four covers European settlement in the Waikato during the 1880s with no mention of the Waikato War or its outcome, creating a time gap spanning almost two decades. The flow of the story now feels as if Waikato Maori simply gave way to European settlement, which was simply not the case.

In short, the book was censored – any mention of the Waikato War was taken out. The reason for this was because at an early planning stage, the wider National Historical Committee overseeing the *Centennial Surveys* had decided that the topics of religion or warfare were not to be included in the *Surveys*, Joseph Heenan pointing out that his department had already published *The New Zealand Wars* (Barrowman in Renwick 2004: 167). Cowan's inclusion of a chapter on the Waikato War was a direct challenge to the editorial committee's brief, but its omission ultimately created a distorted timeline of settlement in the central North Island.

Fortunately, one significant chapter made it through to the presses unscathed. The chapter was called 'The Frontier Road' (Chapter Eight) and

showed how the building of roads was a means of pacifying Maori by creating easier access by armies to their territories, regardless of the economic benefits that roads accrued as avenues of commerce. Cowan cited a road conceived by General Wade, which was used by his troops to pacify the Scottish highlands in the eighteenth century, as the political reasoning behind pushing roads into remote regions (63). In New Zealand's case, a military road led inland from the East Coast to Lake Waikaremoana (64-5), which meant that the Urewera Ranges could no longer be used as a safe refuge from government forces, as it had once been for Te Kooti. The building of another road to Kawhia Harbour ended at the stronghold of the Maori King, Taiwhio (66), making him and his followers vulnerable. 'But the frontier road lasts, and men pass to and fro upon it, because the road is also a thing of peace,' Cowan added at the end of the chapter (67). He might have merely been supplying balance with that last statement, for colonialism had to be shown as having *some* positive effects, such was the purpose of the *Centennial Surveys* in general.

Dennis McEldowney would later encapsulate the *Centennial Surveys* project in his chapter 'Publishing, Patronage, Literary Magazines' in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*, when he wrote:

Like a movie still, this short-term enterprise freezes a developing generation into the attitudes of the moment. It shows them on the road between the beliefs of their parents and those which a later generation (and they themselves, often enough) would regard as the norm. It shows that some were making the journey more whole-heartedly than others, or moving faster along some roads than others (McEldowney in Sturm 654).

Cowan had the last laugh, though. *Settlers and Pioneers* went on to become one of the five most popular volumes of the *Centennial Surveys*, according to a 1944 audit conducted by Whitcombe and Tombs for the Department of Internal Affairs. Cowan's volume had only 24 copies left unsold; *Letters and Art in New Zealand* held sixth spot with 250 copies unsold, but it did much better than the volumes on science, education or farming (Barrowman in Renwick 175).

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